

THE FLORENTINE DAGGER



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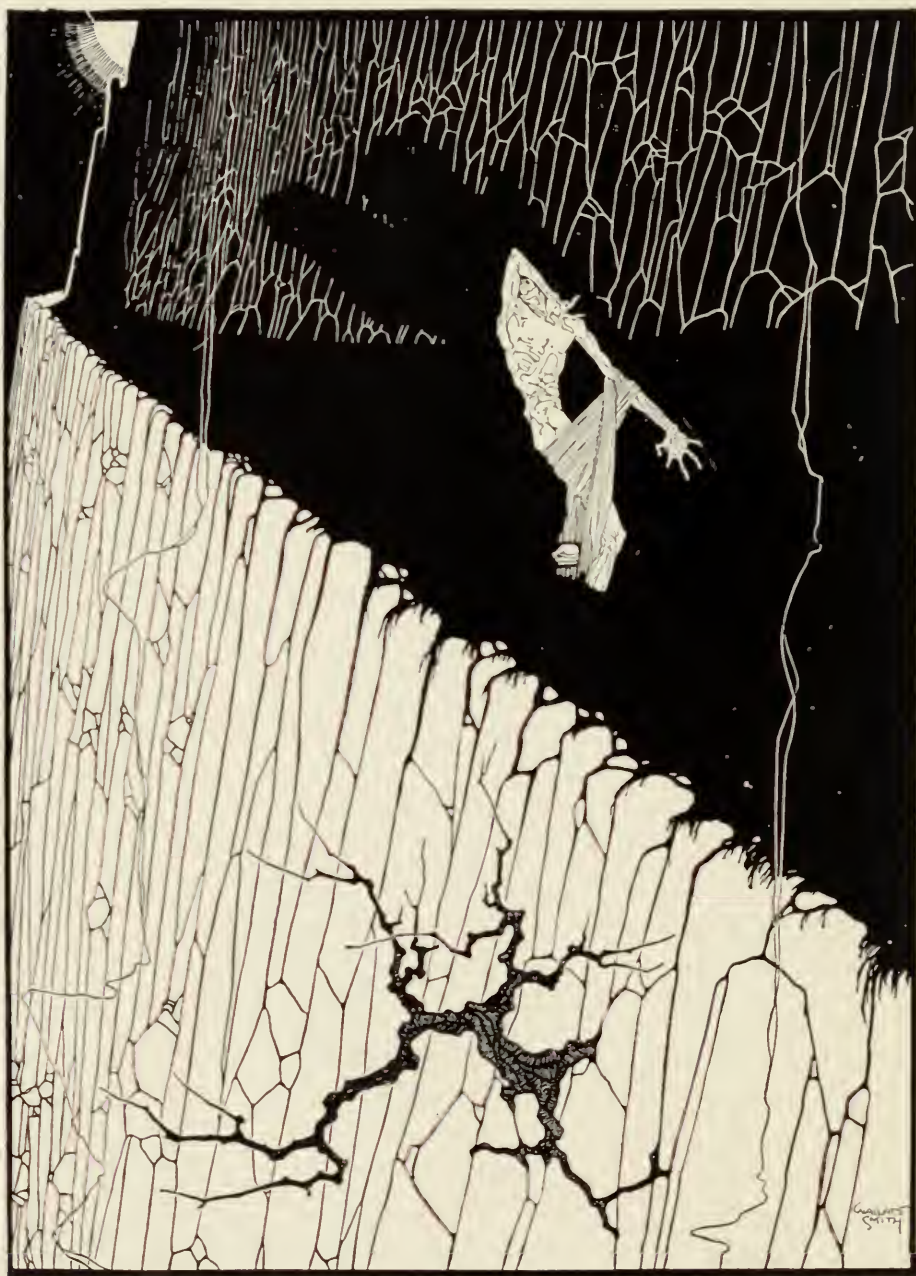
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THE FLORENTINE DAGGER



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THE FLORENTINE DAGGER

A Novel for Amateur Detectives

BY
BEN HECHT



BONI AND LIVERIGHT
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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BONI AND LIVERIGHT, INC.

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TO JOSEPHINE DITRICHSTEIN,
who graciously promised to read my next
book, providing, of course, it was a mystery
story

WALLACE SMITH'S ILLUSTRATIONS

The five illustrations contained in the following pages, and the jacket design, are the work of the new phenomenal black and white artist, Wallace Smith. In making the drawings Mr. Smith chose to illustrate the spirit of the text rather than its letter. The result is this series of Renaissance pictures whose dark opulence curiously interprets the moods of the story's hero, Prince Julien de Medici—of Broadway.

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THE FLORENTINE DAGGER

THE FLORENTINE DAGGER

CHAPTER I

VELVET SOULS

Containing a nervous cavalier with frightened eyes—
Introducing a mysterious and puritanical satyr—And
discussing the tired ghosts that haunted the heart of
Julien De Medici.

IN the firelight the face of Julien De Medici appeared like a gray and scarlet mask of ennui. Oblivious of the ornamental room with its pattern of books, statues and tapestries, he sat stiffly in the carved wooden chair and stared at the burning logs. He was waiting for his host, Victor Ballau.

Except for the crackling of the burning wood, the room was still. Cowled shadows reared witch-like shapes across the walls and ceiling.

It was night outside. Wind quarreled with the stone buildings. Removing his eyes reluctantly from the burning logs, De Medici glanced at the darkness of the empty room. He studied the shadows with frightened eyes.

He was a curious man of thirty. An aristocratic ugliness marked his face. The long, thin nose, the high cheek-bones, the wide, inanimate mouth and the green-tinted skin gave him a lithographic rather than human air. His black hair was cut in a straight line across his forehead. He wore it unparted in such a manner that it made an almost square frame for the elongated rigidity of his face.

A striking and bizarre figure, poised, precise and seemingly of another world, he lived chiefly in his eyes. They were narrow and black, symmetrical to a point of artificiality. But under the parenthesis of the brows lived a startling man.

From the carved chair before the burning logs, De Medici studied the shadows. He disliked darkness and empty rooms. Shadows frightened him. Opened doors chilled him. Yet his immobile face smiled derisively.

“Fear,” he thought. “It’s like a disease.”

He smiled again as if amused at the emotion disturbing him.

“Ghosts,” he continued to himself. His eyes were on the opened door in the shadows at the end of the room. “Ghosts walk around inside me.”

And he fell to thinking of an old subject—of the ghosts that prowled the mysterious corridors of his soul. . . . De Medici—ah, what a name! A sarcophagus of evil. . . .

He recalled with a shudder the excitement of the critics who had written about the opening of his play at Victor Ballau's theater two weeks ago. One of them in particular had given him a bad hour. A discerning fellow. . . . He remembered the critic's phrases:

" . . . and now a De Medici turned dramatist. What a name to conjure with! One needs no genealogical chart to assure one that here in Julien De Medici writing plays for Broadway is a descendant of those monstrous and evil adventurers whose villainies once illumined the courts of Europe. . . ."

De Medici smiled at the memory of the words. . . . A bit redundant and in the grand style affected by romantically hungry puritans writing for the press. . . . He continued recalling the review:

"For here again is the De Medici touch. Prince Julien, who witnessed the premier of his first drama—'The Dead Flower'—is a gentleman of exemplary habits and enviable charm. But in this play to which he has signed his name lives again the sardonic evil which once made empire builders of his family. A dreadful humor pervades this amazing work. Its characters are etched with a Satanic deftness refreshingly new—for the stage. . . . Prince Julien of Broadway has borrowed the

soul of his great-great-great-grandmother, with which to write his first drama. . . .”

The burning logs exploded sharply. De Medici sprang to his feet.

“Damn!” he muttered. “It’s the door.”

Walking swiftly across the shadowed room he shut the thing he fancied had frightened him. Yes, opened doors in a dark room, even a lighted room, always chilled him. They reminded him vaguely of something—of winding corridors, of hidden things waiting beyond them. He would sit, slowly terrified, watching an opened doorway, as if awaiting something, as if straining to catch a sound of clanking and wailing. . . .

His earliest memories were those of fears. Windows, silences, doorways, darknesses, lights far away, candle-light in a mirror, winds howling, hidden noises—these were things of which he had been in terror as a boy.

It had been that way with his father, the Prince Julien of the Paris ateliers—an indifferent artist, a violent-tempered, black-haired man who had died at forty, his name a byword even to the decadent aristocracy that postured futilely among the memories of France.

Years after his death De Medici understood the tragedy of the man who had been his father. Rake and scoundrel, he had died raving in drink. A memory of debauches and black deeds had sur-

vived him. But as he grew older the De Medici son understood. These nightmares that bloomed in the recesses of his own thought, these terrors that animated the depths of his nature, had been his father's legacy as well as his own. And, despairing of the ghosts whose whisperings darkened his life, the elder Prince Julien had fled. Drink, women, excesses—scenes of glaring lights and crazed laughter—these had been hiding-places. The notorious De Medici of the Paris '90's had been no more than a frightened refugee fleeing an inheritance.

Left alone in the care of a senile uncle, the boy Julien had stumbled upon a different direction for flight—literature. He had come into his estate at fifteen. At eighteen he had chosen America. France was too familiar. Its ancient roads, the dark corners of Paris, the very air he breathed haunted and frightened him.

Now, after twelve years, he had matured into a nervously brilliant man, engagingly cynical, egoistic as a child and subtle-minded as a Jesuit. Among his friends he was regarded with deference. His name, his manner, his genius combined with his wealth attired him in an unassailable superiority. They found him, however, neither arrogant nor perverse, despite the startling and often horrible plots and ideas which came from his pen. None, not even his few intimates, had ever

intruded upon his secret, had ever glimpsed behind the charming and stenciled smile of Prince Julien, the "Borgian" ghosts that pantomimed in his soul.

The offending door closed, De Medici returned to his chair. He yearned to turn on the lights of the room. With the cheerful glare of the electric bulbs the dim terrors assailing him would vanish. But, as always, he treated himself to this discipline—a refusal to humor the senseless fears of his nerves. He folded his hands and smiled, regretting his action in closing the door.

A step in the corridor leading to the room lifted the tension under which he sat. Victor Ballau at last. Yet he waited, apprehensive, as the step approached, as the door slowly opened. With the familiar figure of his friend standing in the far glow of the fire, however, De Medici's nervousness vanished.

He stood up to greet his host. There was no longer hint of fears about him. His narrow eyes smiled. His teeth glittered in the wide mouth as he laughed.

"Toasting myself like a martyr at your fireplace, Victor," he said.

The two men shook hands. Ballau was a man of fifty-five, gentle-spoken, restrained of manner and, in his very bearing, a connoisseur of life. His hair was gray. He was tall and stood erect.

"You made quite a picture by the fireplace, Julien," he said. "Gad, you get to look more and more medieval. Florence come in yet?"

"No, thank Heaven."

"Hm." Ballau looked at his friend. "Shall I turn on some lights?"

"Nicer this way," De Medici answered. "I'm in a soft and romantic mood."

Ballau sat down. The two lighted cigarettes. De Medici puffed calmly.

"You see," he said, smiling at his host, "it's the first chance I've had of getting you alone in a week. You're an elusive parent."

Ballau nodded. "What's happened?"

"Love," murmured De Medici. "A corroding and devouring passion."

Ballau studied his cigarette.

"It's hard to believe you're serious, Julien," he said. "Florence?"

"An observant father. I congratulate you, Victor."

"Well, what do you want of me?"

"And modest. The parent ideal! Your consent, of course."

"This, my dear Julien, is so sudden. And then your old-fashioned tactic of appealing to the usually negligible parent is somewhat alarming."

"The fact that you're her father," De Medici answered, "is a matter of secondary importance,

come to think of it. What I've chiefly come for is advice."

"My advice," Ballau answered softly, "is, of course, marry the gal and live happily ever afterward."

"Thanks. But there's another thing. Her going on with her acting."

"Tut, tut," the older man smiled. "Give her her own way. I should think it an excellent arrangement. With 'The Dead Flower' going over as it is you should be able to turn out at least one play a year and keep Madame De Medici employed under your auspices."

"Thanks again."

"That being settled," Ballau sighed, "we might as well have some light—and a glass of cognac. I walked over from the theater and I'm rather cold."

De Medici turned as the door opened. Jane, the gaunt and hollow-eyed housekeeper, was standing on the threshold.

"Glasses," murmured Ballau.

The woman nodded and, with a glance at the guest, disappeared. De Medici frowned to himself. This was another of his obsessions—an aversion to silent people. Servants invariably irritated him. Their closed mouths, their waiting eyes, their inscrutable inferiorities disturbed him.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Ballau announced as the footsteps of the woman died away.

Alone, De Medici smiled. Phantoms no longer disturbed him. He sat thinking of Victor Ballau. A curious man. Almost as curious as himself, perhaps. Debonair, prosperous, cultured. Yet something odd about him. He had made an actress of his daughter—not a difficult task. The luxurious figure of the young woman intruded on his thoughts. Vivid as a macaw, with a feline slowness in her gesture. . . . “Ah,” he sighed, “she is a color I need. I grow brittle and antique. She will enable me to live.”

For a lingering moment he contemplated the emotions that the image of her had stirred. Tenderness, self-amusement, and an overwhelming loneliness. “As if I were lost away from her,” he mused, “as if I were sick and bewildered for some place to go. . . .”

Then his musings returned to her father. Yes, a curious man. A background of tapestries, rare books, antique collections and a chattering circle of poets, dancers, painters, connoisseurs. A quixotic fancy for the theater, he had achieved distinction out of his failures, producing deftly written comedies of manners and dramas of mood that never ran. Yet the theater with its rigmarole of intrigue, gamble, women and craftsmanship was another part of Ballau’s background.

But an exterior Ballau, he mused. There was something else about the man, and this thing whispered itself always to De Medici's sensitive imagination. This man of the theater whose apartment was the haunt of a Sybarite, whose cavalierly manner was the envy of a hundred bon vivants, was, paradoxically, a puritan. A charming and unmalicious puritan.

"A man of taste," thought De Medici, "wealthy and with an infatuation for beautiful things. . . . I've seen him rave before a Titian . . . yet no women. Intrigues shadow him. Beauties pursue him. And still he remains a baffling and graceful Galahad where one looks with certainty for a Don Juan. It would be hard for him to dissemble—surrounded by so avid a pack of scandal-mongers."

De Medici nodded to himself. There was something else about Ballau—the quality toward which his own peculiar nature responded always with readiness. Secrecy—veiled things that lurked behind the smiles of men and women, furtive lights that came to their eyes when they grew silent . . . he had felt this quality in Ballau. It had, in fact, precipitated their comradeship.

His thought could place no words on it, but his intuitions led him toward a mystery—an unknown Ballau, a jealously guarded stranger who lived a secret life behind the debonair and gentle exterior of the man he knew.

"I've been thinking it over," Ballau began talking as he reëntered the room carrying bottle and glasses on a tray, "and I'll supplement my advice, Julien. Let the minor details adjust themselves. If you're in love with Florence, the thing to do, I fancy, is to tell her so."

He seemed flushed as he placed the tray on a table. He was smiling, but De Medici noticed that his fingers trembled.

"Love," the older man continued, "is a rare and everlasting flower. . . ."

He paused and closed his eyes. De Medici noted the darkening pain that passed over his features. Ballau, however, continued once more in a light voice:

"I should avoid making your proposal of marriage to her a discussion on economics or a debate on whether a woman's place is in the home . . . or on the stage. You can settle all that after you're married with just as much indignation and dissatisfaction to you both as you can before the ceremony."

De Medici, fascinated by the nervous hands of the man, laughed.

"Yes, I think you're right," he answered. "With your permission, I'll deceive the young lady and save up my debates for some future breakfast table."

"To a gay and worthy happiness for you and her," said Ballau, raising one of the glasses.

His voice had grown soft, but his eyes, as De Medici smiled back to him, turned away. The young man replaced his glass and, despite himself, felt again the curious presences that had haunted him a half hour before . . . presences that awoke always under the influence of symbols—opened doors, darkened windows, lights gleaming in mirrors . . . and enigmatic faces.

“There’s something else,” whispered itself in his thought, and for a moment he stared fearfully at the averted eyes of his friend. Then, recovering himself, he said:

“Shall we go down to the theater for the performance?”

Ballau shook his head.

“I’d rather read,” he answered. “And, besides, from now on I feel I’d only be in the way.”

“Nonsense!” De Medici smiled. “I’ve a clever idea for making love . . . and I’m not at all averse to an enlarged audience. . . .”

Ballau smiled refusal and De Medici bowed slightly.

“I’ll see you to-morrow then,” he said, and walked from the room.

Victor Ballau stood for moments alone in his library. His eyes traveled caressingly over the luxuries that surrounded him. Beautiful things . . . beautiful things . . . his eyes and fingers

invariably grew alive in their presence. Carved chairs that had once beckoned the vivacious and swashbuckling bodies of Florentines, Englishmen and Castilians. Books within whose covers the strange dreams of men had yellowed. Prints and cabinets, hangings and trinkets all breathing an air of romantic beginnings, survivors all of vanished splendors and obsolete dramas. He stood gazing around him. . . . The great centuries whispered out of the ornamental litter of the room.

Lowering himself into the chair in which De Medici had sat, Ballau opened a book. His eyes, however, were unable to keep to the print. They closed as if in revery and again the weariness and pain that De Medici had noted, darkened his face.

An hour later, Jane, gaunt and hollow-eyed, appeared in the doorway.

"Mr. Ballau," she said in a dull voice.

He opened his eyes and stared at her in confusion. He had been dreaming.

"Will there be supper after the theater tonight?" she asked.

"No, Jane," he murmured. "You can turn in."

His eyes, haunted and preoccupied—as furtive and veiled as the eyes of the man who had sat in the chair before him—followed the slow-moving figure of the housekeeper as she walked out of the doorway.

CHAPTER II

THE VEILED APHRODITE

In which a lady of barbaric eyes smiles, sighs, and weeps
—In which Eros obliges with a saxophone solo—A
morning of golden shadows and an off-stage pizzicato.

NEW YORK on a spring morning. . . . A leap of windows toward a gay sky, a carnival of windows, windows fluttering like silver pennants, unwinding in checkerboards and domino lines. A deluge of signs, a sweep of acrobatic advertisements, a circus of roof tops and a fanfare of stone, the city flings itself into a glittering panorama. It stands in bewildered pantomime. Gigantic and amazing, it hovers like an inverted abyss over a wavering pavement of hats.

De Medici turned his eyes from the trumpeting geometries of the skyscrapers and looked at the young woman beside him.

“We’re an intrusion,” he said close to her. The crowds drifted tenaciously around them. “Paolo and Francesca,” he smiled, “murmuring in Bedlam. Can’t we go somewhere?”

His lean face regarded her dreamily as she answered:

“The morning is wonderful.”

"The morning is a nuisance," he demurred. "But you! Beautiful—yes, your eyes are like gardens, night gardens. Come, we'll go somewhere. We'll take a cab. I want to talk to you in a gentle and persuasive voice."

The young woman, Florence Ballau, nodded. De Medici stared excitedly at her. Her presence delighted and warmed him. An amazing woman. She wore her youth like a banner. Her gypsy face under a blue toque stamped itself like an exotic flower on the gray and yellow background of the crowd. Her lips were parted, her deep eyes were laughing darkly.

De Medici restrained the ecstasy that threatened to start him stammering. She was tonic. Her body, luxurious and vibrant under the silver cloth of her dress, bewildered him. He was in love. But more than that, the flamboyant life of the girl, the gay and dominant poise of her manner, her voice, her head, exhilarated him in a curious way. A sense of awe came to him as he studied for an instant the exotically masked vigor of his companion. His own subtle and convoluted nature prostrated itself blissfully before her vivid dominance.

"Let's go to father's office," she said. He found it difficult to object. Nevertheless he blurted an objection.

"Impossible."

“Well, why not just walk to the park and sit down?” she persisted.

De Medici shook his head.

“Damn it all!” he exclaimed. “I’m going to make love and I don’t want a lot of fat policemen walking up and down in front of me or a parade of squirrel-feeding old maids staring rebukefully. I’ve set my mind on a cab. It’s distinctly modern.”

“But a fearful waste of money,” the girl smiled.

“Ah,” De Medici murmured, “then you do love me.”

“Of course,” she answered.

They stood silently in the press of the crowds moving down Fifth Avenue, their fingers touching, De Medici’s eyes grew misty. He felt curiously at peace, as if he had escaped forever the dark things inside him.

“We’ll take a cab, anyway,” he said finally. Then, as the girl raised her luminous face to him, he grew buoyant. He looked about him with a feeling of surprise. He had awakened from a bad dream. Prince Julien the cynical and tormented survivor of an evil race had vanished. Here was an ecstatic and humorous youth making love to a marvelous creature under the towers of a new civilization.

“I’ve a lot of speeches I’ve always wanted to include as a part of my first and last pro-

posal. We'll get into a cab and I'll propose."

He hailed a taxi and they entered.

"Drive," he smiled at the chauffeur, "slowly and carefully, anywhere you want."

The man nodded, grinned, and pocketed a bill.

They were silent as the cab moved away.

"Well," said Florence at last, "you may begin."

De Medici looked at her.

"I love you," he whispered. "Will you marry me?"

"You promised speeches," she laughed.

"I've changed my mind," he said, staring at her. "I can't think of anything to say."

They were silent again. The cab entered a park. Turning to her, De Medici raised her hand to his lips. His restless, burning eyes remained on her face. He felt intoxicated. Her profile with its parted red lips, its tiny line of white teeth, her eyes dark and desirous as they avoided him, her aromatic hair in black coils under the toque.

"Dearest," he whispered, "I adore you."

She nodded, still avoiding his eyes.

Then, "When do you want to get married?" she asked.

De Medici extricated himself from his emotions.

"Tomorrow," he answered calmly.

"That's too soon. I'll have to tell father first."

"I've told him all about it," he smiled.

“Well!”

De Medici nodded and looked fearfully at her. She was angry. Her face had grown bright with color.

“What did he say?” she asked.

Ignoring the change in her voice, De Medici answered:

“He gave me some advice. He advised me against starting any arguments with you.”

Florence turned her eyes to him. They were burning and enigmatic.

“Curious,” he thought. “She’s like him. She hides something.”

He felt miserable again. But his hand caressed her arm.

“Arguments about what?” she asked quietly.

“Oh, this and that,” De Medici answered smiling. “Never mind asking me. Let’s save up all the arguments for another time, when we have nothing else to talk about.”

“What did he say?” she persisted. Then: “Excuse me. We’ll tell him and have him announce the engagement. He’ll love that.”

Her face was again gay and dominant. De Medici nodded.

“I’ll telephone him,” he said quickly, and tapped on the driver’s window. The cab stopped. Leaning out of the door, De Medici gave a vague direction.

"Take us to a telephone," he said. The driver nodded as if he appreciated the details of the situation. They started again.

"Julien," the girl exclaimed suddenly. She was laughing. Her arms embraced the surprised young man. He felt himself powerless for an instant. The warmth of her body was against him. Her lips waited intimately for his kiss.

"Oh, I adore you," he murmured. His arms tightened around her and they remained embraced as the cab rolled jerkily on.

The driver was talking. De Medici removed his eyes bewilderedly from Florence.

"What is it?" he inquired.

"I think there's a telephone in that drugstore," the driver repeated.

De Medici stepped out of the cab. Several minutes later he returned, smiling broadly.

"The parent thaws," he announced exuberantly. "We have his consent and his blessing."

"But you told me you had all that in advance," Florence laughed.

"I know," he went on excitedly, "but our talk last night was only sort of a rehearsal."

"What did he say?" she asked as he sat down beside her.

"Going to announce it tonight. Says he'll summon a gathering worthy of the event."

"Poor father," murmured Florence. Her face had grown sad.

"He's delightful," cried De Medici.

"He's the most charming man in the world," she added.

The driver put in an apologetic appearance.

"Where to?" he asked.

"I think we'd better go back to the theater," Florence murmured. De Medici gave the direction.

"Well," she smiled as they started again, "from a literary point of view your proposal has been a decided failure. I rather expected something—bizarre."

"Give me time," De Medici smiled. "I'll improve. But why to the theater now?"

"There's a *matinée* today."

He frowned.

"You don't mean you're going to play this afternoon?"

"Are you insane? Of course I am."

"And let that boulder Mitchell make love to you in the second act . . . after this?"

"I swear you're out of your head, Julien."

"You kiss him," he growled.

"You wrote the play, my dear."

"Hm." He looked at her whimsically thoughtful. "I'll rewrite it. The kiss isn't necessary. I'll go back and take it out. You don't have to

kiss him. You can just look at him—with feigned tenderness. It'll be enough. How do you suppose I'm going to feel watching you embrace that bounder and kiss him every night?"

"You told me last week I did the part wonderfully," she smiled.

They were in front of the theater. De Medici held her arm.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked.

"I promised to have dinner with Fedya this evening. Why don't you go and help father arrange his party and call for me after the performance tonight?"

De Medici nodded. He appeared to have grown speechless. He looked with infatuated silence at the girl. Then, with a sigh, he bowed, removing his fedora and placing it cavalierly over his heart.

"Until we meet again, beloved," he whispered and, turning, walked away.

The girl stood where he had left her, her dark eyes following his figure until it was lost in the crowd. An expression of despair had come to her face. Sorrow and uncertainty seemed to claim her. She stepped forward as if to recall the vanishing Julien. Then, changing her mind, she turned and walked to the foyer. She entered the empty theater with tears glistening in her dark eyes.

CHAPTER III

MURDER

In which Julien De Medici collides with a tantalizing corpse—In which a dagger, a candlestick, a crucifix, and a false beard mumble incoherently.

PROMPTLY at ten o'clock that night De Medici walked distractedly into the stage entrance of the Galt Theater. He had spent the day in a fever of expectancy. A memory had followed him like an offensive companion.

"She was crying when I went away. She stood looking after me and wept."

He had watched Florence unseen by her during the few minutes she hesitated white-faced and weeping in front of the theater after his farewell.

"I'm a fool," he argued with himself. "She was excited, overwrought. She loves me. And perhaps there's something she'll tell me later."

He had offered his services to his friend Ballau after dinner.

"There's nothing you can do except mess up things," Ballau remonstrated. "I suggest a long, fatiguing walk."

He had smiled kindly and De Medici, unable to

dissemble his cat-like nervousness, had blurted out:

"I find it almost impossible to wait."

"The guests will be here around eleven," Ballau had answered. "Go walk around till then and don't get run over or fall down any manholes."

Entering the theater, De Medici looked around the back stage quickly for a glimpse of Florence. The wings were crowded with actors and actresses waiting the rise of the third-act curtain.

"Where's Miss Ballau?" he inquired of Cort, the stage manager.

Cort, a sour-looking man with the disillusion and sophistications of his profession stamped on his face, turned angrily.

"Oh, hello!" he said, noticing De Medici. "We've had the devil of a time."

De Medici looked at him uncomfortably.

"Miss Ballau had to leave," went on Cort.

"Leave! What do you mean?"

Cort swore softly.

"We've had a time of it for the last fifteen minutes. Miss Ballau got a telephone call at the end of the second act. It knocked her out. Refused to go on with the show. Said it was impossible. And we've gotten Fedya Gatin, the understudy, to finish the last act."

De Medici listened in amazement.

"A telephone call," he repeated. "Where did she go?"

"I don't know," growled Cort. "All I know is she left us in the devil of a mess . . . and lit out of here like a streak, make-up on and everything. Wouldn't stop to change or listen to reason. . . ."

"Did she say anything?" De Medici interrupted.

The news had left him unaccountably sick at heart. He made an effort to remove the fears that were clouding his thought and to conjure up a logical reason—a calm reason—for her departure. He turned desperately to the manager, who had started to move off.

"Wait a minute. What did she say on the telephone?"

"Nothing," answered Cort. "I couldn't get what it was about. She said, 'Yes. Yes. Oh, God!' hung up and was out of here before anybody knew what had happened."

De Medici dropped the man's arm and hurried from the theater. In the dark alley he paused and stared nervously about him. The darkness frightened him. Strange glints were in his eyes. He ran his long fingers over his forehead and shuddered. Something had happened!

He sat thinking as the cab hurried him to the Ballau apartment. . . . "She was crying this morning after our ride . . . there was something

curious about Ballau . . . he wanted to get rid of me. . . .”

A sense of relief came to him when the cab drew up before the ornate apartment building in Park Avenue. As he stepped out he noticed quickly that the scene was calm, that inside the marble lobby the stiff figure of the doorman stood—a symbol of quietude and elegance.

Entering the building, he nodded to the man at the door and walked quickly to the elevator at the rear of the vestibule. As he approached, the flingreed door of the self-operating elevator cage clicked and was thrown open.

Florence Ballau, her eyes wide with horror, staggered out. She stood looking wildly till her eyes encountered De Medici. She stumbled toward him with a shriek.

“Father . . . father,” her voice filled the marble interior. “Murdered!”

De Medici held the girl in his arms. An inexplicable calm had taken possession of him. He regarded the scene aloofly—the hysterical girl, the suddenly galvanized doorman, the ornamental brass work of the marble vestibule.

“Something has happened,” he said quietly to the man as he came running forward. “Call the police. Send them up to Mr. Ballau’s apartment.”

She moaned his name as his arms held her.

But a curious caution had entered his thought. Half carrying her, he entered the elevator and turned the automatic starter to Floor 5.

The white enameled door of the Ballau apartment was open. De Medici supported Florence across the threshold.

"Get a hold of yourself," he whispered to her. She raised her eyes in amazement. His voice, cool and soft, held a tone she had never heard. Florence pointed toward the library and watched him walk to the door. He turned the iron knob and stood looking into the room he had quitted a few hours before. Before him was the famous Ballau library converted into a curious wreck. Chairs had been overturned, books scattered and ripped in half, vases smashed, pictures torn from the wall and destroyed. An air of incomprehensible and sinister disorder hovered in the dimly lighted chamber.

De Medici's eyes traveled from detail to detail. He had sat in this room a night ago, staring at the burning logs, his thought darkened with fears—fears of an opened door, of the shadows that wavered behind his chair. But now facing the grewsome scene, his eyes lost their furtiveness. He moved with soft, quick steps to the body of Victor Ballau. Stretched on the floor in his black trousers, patent leather pumps and dress shirt lay his friend. The face was staring at the ceil-



ing. A red stain circled the shirt front and from the center of the stain protruded the ornamental hilt of a dagger. A large, black crucifix had been placed above the wound.

De Medici knelt beside the man. He was dead, his eyes were open and filled with the same gentleness which had characterized them in life.

"Murdered," he whispered.

He continued to kneel as if under the influence of a fascination. The dagger hilt with its medieval pattern, the black crucifix, and the inert white face with its familiar features held the glittering eyes of De Medici. Strange impulses stirred in him. He shuddered.

"I am not afraid before death," his thought was saying. "It arouses something in me. . . . Murder . . . murder. . . ."

His mind repeated the word.

"I grow calm before murder," he went on thinking swiftly. "Something grows calm inside me."

His fingers reached slowly toward the dagger hilt.

"De Medici . . . De Medici," he murmured half aloud, and sprang to his feet. His face had become white. His eyes burned as if with fever.

Florence and Jane, the housekeeper, were standing dumbly in the doorway. De Medici stared at them.

"Who did it?" he asked.

Florence shook her head and wept. Her hands were on her cheeks and the look of horror he had noticed as she stumbled out of the elevator had returned. He moved quickly to her side and placed an arm around her shoulders.

"The police will be here in a minute," he said. "What happened?"

She answered still in tears, her eyes centered.

"I don't know. I came home early. I had a headache. Jane let me in."

Her weeping overcame her.

"I opened the door," she gasped, "and saw . . . this. I screamed, and Jane came running from the kitchen. I don't remember anything else until I saw you downstairs."

De Medici caressed her shoulder and turned to the housekeeper.

"What happened?" he asked.

The woman regarded him with terrified eyes.

"I don't know," she wailed. "I was in the kitchen making sandwiches and I didn't hear anything until Miss Ballau screamed and I came in here and saw him . . . there. . . ."

She pointed to the body and began to weep.

"Oh, he was such a good man."

Three policemen in uniform entered. De Medici turned to them.

"Mr. Ballau has just been murdered," he said quietly. "He's in the library."

The three men nodded and walked to the open door of the disordered room.

"Is there any other door to this place except here?" one of them asked.

"No," said De Medici. "The library faces on the street."

"There's a fire escape." Florence came forward. She pointed to the window. "It runs past there."

The policeman nodded.

"We'll take charge till the chief comes. Don't allow anybody to leave the house and don't touch anything."

Jane, the housekeeper, sat motionless in a chair, weeping softly, her apron to her eyes. De Medici stood regarding the woman he loved. Her tears had stopped. A question was in his mind. Who had telephoned? And what had brought her home so precipitously from the theater? But the question remained unspoken. He stood with his arm around her asking nothing, thinking nothing, and watching the door.

It opened and a thick-set middle-aged man with reddish hair appeared.

"Lieutenant Norton," he announced himself.

De Medici nodded and extended his hand.

"I am Julien De Medici," he said. "Mr. Ballau has just been murdered."

The lieutenant looked at him closely. Two

detectives followed the lieutenant into the room.

“Where is the body?” Norton asked. De Medici indicated the library. The lieutenant addressed his assistants.

“Stay here, Jim,” he said. To the other he added, “And you come with me. Wait here, Mr. De Medici—with the ladies, if you please.”

“Come, we’ll sit down,” De Medici whispered. Florence shook her head.

“I feel as if I could go mad,” she muttered.

De Medici recalled the flushed, laughing face of the girl who had ridden with him through the park. Her eyes had filled him with a sense of worship. Aloof, darkly laughing eyes. Yes, it had been an overwhelming moment when the arrogant gypsy loveliness of the young woman had yielded.

“But it was I who yielded.” He stood thinking and regarding her averted face. “A desire to prostrate myself. I remember. Curious . . . curious. And now she’s stopped weeping. When the lieutenant came in she changed. She’s thinking of something. She’s taking hold of herself. The telephone call—the rush from the theater. It’ll have to be explained. Her father is dead. But there’s something else more important even than her grief. Her eyes avoid me. . . .”

De Medici’s eyes caught a glimpse of his fingers. They were reddened. His thought continued:

“Blood on my hands. Incriminating. I reached over and touched the dagger and stained my fingers. Poor Ballau. And yet I felt no grief when I kneeled there. I felt something else—as if all this had happened once before. Yes, the body, the dagger, the crucifix seemed familiar. I was calm. I knew what to do. Ah, De Medici blood. Centuries pass and it still flows unchanged in me. Yes, why not admit it? Something exulted in me at the sight of the room, the dim lights, the murdered man. There was no fear, no nervousness. But a strange feeling of familiarity. And then a revulsion. I routed the exulting De Medici phantoms. And now what? Trouble. A telephone call. She’ll tell lies. Her face is already a lie. Stern, poised, ready to fight for something. . . . What a woman! Yes, I’m more in love than before. Her eyes are like a shrine for something in me. They overpower me. My mind evaporates.”

De Medici reached suddenly for her hand.

“Florence,” he whispered, “remember . . . regardless of anything—I adore you.”

Fifteen minutes had passed and Lieutenant Norton appeared.

“I’d like to see you,” he said, nodding at De Medici. He followed the detective into the room. For a second time the amazingly disordered room confronted him.

“I’ve made a hasty examination,” Norton began. “I’ve also sent for Dr. Greer, the physician for our squad. He’ll be here shortly. In the meantime we can talk over a few things. When did this happen? I mean exactly. Do you know?”

The eyes of the detective rested on De Medici’s stained fingers as he spoke. De Medici held his hand to the light.

“Hardly evidence,” he answered the man’s unspoken question. “I got that on my fingers when I kneeled over the body to look at the wound.”

Norton nodded. De Medici continued and repeated the scant information he had at his command—starting with the appearance of Florence Ballau in the vestibule of the apartment.

“Hm,” muttered the detective. Then after a pause, “I see. Nothing much. Did you notice what he has in his hand?”

He pointed to the dead man and De Medici bent over the body. He stared with surprise. The fingers of Victor Ballau were clutched around a short, pointed false beard—a black Vandyke.

“It was a man, then,” De Medici murmured.

“You thought it might have been a woman?” Norton asked quietly.

De Medici shrugged his shoulders. The lieutenant appeared to forget his question and con-

tinued, "There's also this thing here." He indicated a heavy brass candlestick whose body was ornamented with carved salamander figures twining toward its mouth. It contained an unlighted candle and stood to the left of the dead man's head.

"Was that lighted when you came in first?" Norton asked.

"No," said De Medici. "I would have noticed it."

"The top is still a little warm," the detective explained, "and you'll notice two or three tallow drippings on the rug there. It was burning less than a half hour ago."

"Have you any idea how the murderer escaped?" De Medici asked, raising his eyes to the detective.

"I'm not certain yet," Norton answered. "But I don't think he has escaped."

De Medici nodded slowly. The man's words had started a strange panic in his brain. He waited until his voice felt clear and then spoke.

"Hadn't we better search the house, then? He may have gotten away down the fire escape. It leads past the window."

Lieutenant Norton stared thoughtfully at the lean-faced, cold-spoken young man. "An odd fellow," he repeated to himself, "nervous and high-strung as a woman. Frightened out of his wits.

And yet calm—yes, calm as a dead fish.” Aloud he said:

“I don’t think a search is necessary. Of course it’s too early to say anything definite, but my first impression—and they’re usually the best—is that there’s been no murder. Mr. Ballau committed suicide.”

CHAPTER IV

THE EMPTY WEB

In which a detective weaves a theory—In which Julien De Medici stares at a clew—In which Pandora raises a warning finger to her lips—A table set for two, an initialed purse, an ancient theater program—but the story waits.

DE MEDICI could hear the murmur and exclamations of the arriving guests. They were gathering in the large reception hall—painters, men and women of the stage, poets, dilettantes—the charming crew of professionals who had formed a background for Victor Ballau's fastidious existence.

There was a sound of women beginning to weep, of men uttering cries of disbelief, of police ordering guests into the adjoining room to wait. De Medici sighed. This was to have been the gala night—raised wineglasses, toasts and laughter. He looked at the figure on the floor with the dagger protruding from its heart. Suicide!

Yes, the detective whose keen blue eyes had covered the situation said that Victor Ballau, charming, easy-mannered connoisseur of wines, pictures and people, had suddenly ended his life. Preposterous! De Medici glanced at the lieutenant. A clumsy ruse, perhaps, to throw someone off

guard. Yet the man seemed simple. His voice contained an unmistakable ring of sincerity. Lieutenant Norton was talking again.

“Has that table usually been in this room?” he asked. He pointed to a walnut-topped card table standing beside the fireplace. De Medici shook his head.

“I never saw that before,” he answered.

“It looks as if two people might have been sitting at that table preparing to eat,” the detective smiled.

De Medici noted the contents of the table top with surprise. It was a detail that had escaped him. There were two glasses and an opened wine bottle between them, several empty plates and a napkin. But he noticed neither cutlery nor sign of food. Norton rose as he studied this strange fact.

“Hello, doctor.”

A middle-aged, medical-looking man with a bald head had entered the room. Norton introduced him.

“Dr. Greer,” he said.

The doctor greeted De Medici with a nod and leaned over the body on the floor. His fingers felt around the imbedded dagger for a moment, and then slowly withdrew the weapon. He straightened, holding the dripping blade to the light.

“Through the heart,” he commented briefly.

“Death was almost instantaneous. An odd sort of knife.”

“We’ll call Miss Ballau,” declared Norton. He gave a direction to his assistant who had remained silent and motionless near the wall.

Florence arrived. De Medici, waiting nervously, his fists clenched on his knees, breathed deeply as she entered. Her vivid face was white. Her eyes were lowered. But behind the collapse of her manner De Medici sensed a tautness, a defiance.

“She’ll talk quietly,” he thought, “and tell nothing. Beautiful, how beautiful she is!”

The detective had started his questioning.

“What time did you come home, Miss Ballau?”

“About half-past ten,” she replied.

“You’re playing in ‘The Dead Flower,’ aren’t you?”

She nodded.

“Then you must have left before the show was over.”

“Yes,” she said, “I had a frightful headache. The day’s excitement, I suppose.”

Her eyes turned to De Medici.

“I proposed to Miss Ballau today,” he explained, “and our engagement was to have been announced tonight at the supper.”

“Yes,” the girl went on, and De Medici caught a grateful glint in her eyes, “I couldn’t go on with the play. I felt I’d forget my lines and I asked the

stage manager to let my understudy take my place. I came home."

"About ten-thirty," repeated the detective.

Florence nodded.

"How did you get in?" he asked.

"I rang the bell several times and Jane finally answered it."

"What did she say to you?"

"Nothing. She'd been busy in the kitchen. She went right back to her work."

"Did she know that anything had happened?"

"No. She seemed entirely calm and went back to the kitchen without saying anything."

"Was the door to the library closed?"

"Yes."

"There's another door at the end of the hallway that shuts off the kitchen, isn't there?"

"There are two doors. The dining room's between."

"So if the library door and the two other doors were closed things could happen in this room without anybody hearing?"

Florence nodded.

"Then what did you do when you came into the house?"

"I came into the library and saw this," she answered.

"Thank you, Miss Ballau," Norton smiled at her. "That will be all for the present. I suggest

you lie down.” To the man at the door he added, “Call the housekeeper.”

Florence stood up and De Medici came to her side. His eyes had avoided her during the questioning. But he pressed her arm eagerly with his fingers now. The lieutenant was watching. He felt certain of this. So he could say nothing now. He felt her draw back as they came to the door, beyond which rose a babble of excited voices.

“If you please, Mr. De Medici,” Norton’s voice called, “will you remain while we examine the housekeeper?”

“I’ll be all right,” she murmured close to him. He opened the door and watched her as she walked slowly and silently down the corridor. Jane, the housekeeper, entered and was motioned to the chair in which Florence had sat.

“What’s your name?” Lieutenant Norton asked.

The woman’s eyes were reddened with crying. Her voice was indistinct.

“Jane Mayfield,” she answered.

“How long have you worked for Mr. Ballau?”

“Ever since he’s been in New York—about fifteen years, I think.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifty-four.”

The detective paused as the woman began again to weep. At length he resumed kindly.

“When did you first find out Mr. Ballau was dead?”

“I let Miss Ballau in and went back to the kitchen to finish the sandwiches for the supper and then I heard her scream. I came running out. She was standing in the door screaming that her father had been murdered.”

“Just what did she say?”

“I don’t remember. It was something about her father being murdered.”

“How long after you let her in did you hear Miss Ballau scream?”

“It was only a minute or two, because I hadn’t started with the sandwiches. I was just beginning to cut them again when I heard her scream.”

“Thank you,” said the detective, “that will be all.”

Jane walked from the room, her eyes avoiding the figure of Ballau stretched at her feet as she passed.

“And now, doctor, and you, Mr. De Medici,” Norton resumed in his natural voice, “we’ll see, I think, that any further investigation will bear out my impression that Mr. Ballau killed himself.”

“Impossible,” murmured De Medici.

“Just a moment,” the detective smiled. “We can go over the obvious details of the case right here. Of course, there will be a further and thor-

ough inquiry. But as it stands the case is rather simple. In the first place, we have here the signs of what seems to have been a terrific struggle between the dead man and some assailant. The struggle took place without attracting the attention of Jane. Pictures were ripped from the walls, pottery smashed, chairs overturned, books torn and thrown around in a fight between Mr. Ballau and, as I say, a possible assailant.

“You will notice, however”—and Norton’s impassive face warmed under the stimulus of his reasoning—“you will notice that Mr. Ballau’s attire is absolutely undisturbed. He had evidently dressed himself for the party tonight. It’s a fresh dress shirt he has on. I’ve looked at it through a glass. There isn’t a soil or a finger mark on it. The tie hasn’t been disarranged nor has the collar been touched. All fresh and clean as a daisy. The murderer might have straightened the dead man’s clothes, but he couldn’t remove the evidence his hands would have left—soils, wrinkles and the like on the linen—during a struggle.

“You’ll notice again that this table here seems to have been set for two. One peculiar thing about it is that there are no knives or forks and no evidences of food. Another peculiar thing is that the wine bottle is empty and has been empty for at least a year. You’ll find, if you look closely,

that there is dust inside the neck of the bottle and that all odor of wine has long gone from it."

De Medici was listening in amazement, thinking behind the words of the detective, "He's clever. A man clever enough to piece together these observations would not be telling me all he knew or thought. He's holding something back. . . . Yes . . . it's a ruse to disarm someone. Me, perhaps. He keeps looking at my fingers. I should have washed them."

When Norton paused De Medici said aloud:

"But the thing in his hand. The false beard. He tore that off somebody."

"Yes," Norton answered, "off himself before he died. If you'll look closely you'll see there are evidences of gum mucilage on his chin."

De Medici stood up slowly.

"The whole thing is insane, lieutenant," he muttered. "Why should a man about to commit suicide disguise himself in a false beard?"

"You'll see in a moment." Norton waved him back to his chair. "I'll give you my theory now and we'll see if it will stand up under investigation. I purposely avoided asking the housekeeper a question. Now listen. Mr. Ballau desired to establish the fact that there was a stranger in the house. He put the beard on and showed himself thus disguised to his housekeeper. I'm sure we'll find on asking her that there was a visitor

here—a man with a black Vandyke. That she caught a brief glimpse of him. Call the Mayfield woman again, sergeant.”

De Medici waited in silence as the man at the door stepped out.

“He keeps looking at my fingers,” he whispered to himself. “And I touched the dagger. My finger-prints are on the hilt.”

He raised his voice.

“Have you searched for finger-prints on the dagger, lieutenant?”

“Yes, I examined it carefully. Iron is a bad receiver. The hilt is of iron and the traces left are insufficient for any practical evidence.”

The housekeeper appeared.

“Just one question,” Norton addressed the white-faced woman soothingly. “Did Mr. Ballau have any callers in the afternoon or evening after Mr. De Medici had left?”

“There are so many people coming and going in this house,” Jane began, her eyes centered on the detective.

“Come, think now, Jane,” Norton persisted. “Did you see anybody in the apartment besides Mr. Ballau . . . anybody at all?”

“I saw Mr. Ballau,” she answered softly. “I saw him.”

“When?”

“After dinner.”

“What did he say and how did he look?”

“He was coming out from shaving,” Jane answered. “I don’t remember he said anything.”

“And after that, who did you see after you saw Mr. Ballau come out from shaving? Now come, think. I know you’re upset, but try to remember.”

The detective’s keen eyes had fastened steadily on the woman. She stood looking at him in silence, her face growing white, her own eyes widening. Then, abruptly, she whispered in a low voice as if talking to herself:

“He . . . he . . . I didn’t exactly see him. I can’t remember. I only saw somebody for a moment. Somebody else. Yes, somebody else.”

Her voice went up into a wail.

“Where were you when you saw this somebody else?” Norton persisted softly.

“I forget,” Jane moaned. “Oh, it’s awful! Somebody else. . . . I saw somebody. . . . I remember. In the hall. I was standing in the hall. It was dark. He was a tall man. He had a black beard.”

“That will be all, Jane.”

The woman, overcome by her emotions, had fallen forward in her chair. The sergeant came to her side. Norton turned with a look of triumph to De Medici and Dr. Greer.

“A simple-minded woman,” he said. “And Ballau knew it would be easy to take her in. And

now for the motive. Suicide usually has a motive as well as murder. I think we'll find two facts: Fact number one, that Ballau was heavily insured. Fact number two, that Ballau was heavily in debt. Then there is also the fact that his daughter, to whom he was devoted, was to be married. With her marriage in sight the father naturally thought that keeping up this pretense"—Norton indicated the apartment by a wave of his hand—"was no longer necessary. We'll probably find that he knew ruin was inevitable and, desiring to leave his daughter something out of the wreck, he thought of his insurance. Insurance often isn't collectable in a case of suicide, so he camouflaged the thing to look like murder."

Again De Medici's mind played with the words of the detective. The man was either feigning or an imbecile. Ah, he should have washed his hands! De Medici shuddered. The whole thing was for his benefit. Fear gleamed suddenly in his eyes. It was a trap for him. An inexplicable sense of guilt overpowered him. His eyes fell from the detective. He continued, however, to reason as the man talked.

"My family cowers inside me," he shivered. "Guilty . . . yes, phantoms that cringe before familiar accusations. Murder. . . . But this policeman is absurd. If Ballau wanted to do something for Florence—the insurance—why

should he crush her with his death? And the false beard . . . good God, he would have taken it off before killing himself and hidden it. . . . But Norton will say he wanted to make it look as if he'd snatched it from someone else's face. Yet the mucilage on his chin. He would have thought of that."

"Do you begin to feel the logic of the thing?" Norton inquired suddenly.

"No," De Medici answered. "It remains impossible in my mind despite everything you say. Mr. Ballau was a man of taste. He would not have gone to such preposterous and unconvincing details as this—the disordered room, the ridiculous idea of a table with an empty wine bottle. . . ."

"I see," Norton nodded. "But you are figuring from a wrong point of view. Suicide isn't as sane and simple a thing as buying a piece of furniture. A man about to take his life is never normal. I mentioned two facts which we will probably find to be the motive. There were unquestionably other facts operating. But of one thing we may be sure. The Ballau who killed himself was not the elegant Mr. Ballau New York knows so well. He was a man in a hysterical condition. He wasn't the cultured and calm gentleman you knew, Mr. De Medici.

"And remember another thing. He was a man

of the theater. When the time came for him to do the thing—his nerves on edge, his mind at a hysterical tension—he reverted to type. He was a man of the theater. He wanted to camouflage it to look like a murder. And the only murders he knew were murders he had witnessed on the stage, murders after which the police arrive to find the table set for two, furniture overturned, clews everywhere—candlesticks, crucifixes, signs of a great struggle—in the usual second-act climax fashion. It was his intention to set the stage for such a murder. But he wasn't himself. He went about his work with the insane deliberation of a man who functions automatically."

Lieutenant Norton stood up.

"I think we'll find some among the guests tonight who'll be able to throw a light on the dead man's finances and troubles," he said. "In the meantime, we'll have the body moved and hold it in the undertaking rooms until the inquest. Of course, what I've outlined here is only the result of first impressions. But, as I've said, first impressions are usually one's best conclusions."

The detective walked out of the room. De Medici rose to follow. As he did an object fell out of the heavy upholstered chair in which he had been sitting. He stooped and picked it up. A woman's purse. Norton had turned at the door and De Medici slipped it quickly into his pocket.

“An old purse,” he murmured to himself, “and there were some faded silver initials in the corner.”

The guests were waiting for him. They crowded around him, babbling questions, exclamations, condolences.

“They’ve taken all our names,” one woman sobbed suddenly. “Oh, poor, dear Victor. . . .”

De Medici, his eyes narrowed, his lean face void of expression, moved from group to group assuring them that all was being done that could be done. He tried vainly to obtain a moment’s private talk with Florence. He had learned that she had retired to her bedroom and was locked in with a nurse summoned by Norton.

“She’s in a rather bad condition,” the detective explained as he saw De Medici prowling in the hallway. “I think you’d better leave her alone for the time being.”

“He’s watching me,” De Medici thought. “Every move I make. He’s been standing behind me as I talked. He was in the doorway of the bathroom as I washed my hands.” He paused in his thought and shivered as a word whimpered somewhere in the recesses of his brain . . . “guilty . . . guilty. . . .”

“I think I’ll leave,” Lieutenant Norton remarked suddenly at his side. “My men will

remain here. And I'll be back early in the morning."

De Medici watched the detective move through the crowded room to the door. He smiled tiredly after the man. A few of Ballau's cronies were remaining. The others were departing in couples and groups. De Medici led the way into a small room Ballau had used as an office. Meyerson the antique dealer, Carvello the painter, and Foreman the retired Shakespearean actor followed him. They lighted cigars and began in measured tones to discuss the qualities of the man who lay dead in the adjoining room. They had learned of Lieutenant Norton's theory and derided the detective's conclusions.

Carvello, a lean, nervous-mannered young man, shrugged his shoulders as De Medici finished relating Norton's conclusions.

"Suicide," he repeated. "Hm. If Ballau put that beard on to disguise himself as a stranger and deceive Jane, why should he leave it on until he had stabbed himself?"

"Because," De Medici sighed, "in his confused and hysterical condition he forgot he was wearing the thing and remembered only after the dagger had entered. That's Norton's theory. His last act was to try to make the camouflage stand up by tearing the thing from his face."

"Absurd," snorted Carvello. "The doctor said,

I heard him myself, that death was almost instantaneous. How could he, after striking such a blow, have lived long enough to tear the thing from his face?"

"Or to have placed a crucifix on his chest?" Meyerson took up the argument. "Or to have blown out the candle?"

The voice of Foreman the old actor rose sonorously:

"Yet Ballau wore the false beard. There was mucilage on his chin."

"Put there by the murderer after the crime," Carvello exclaimed. "There's a camouflage there right enough. But a cleverer one than Norton figured out. Yes, an unconvincing murder scene—carefully prepared by a murderer to enable the police to penetrate its pretense and arrive at the theory of suicide. No soils on his linen, no marks or rumples. Of course not. Ballau was killed by a man suddenly and without struggle. The camouflage followed."

De Medici shook his head. The discussion seemed curiously pointless to him. There was the telephone call at the theater—and there . . .

"He may have worn the beard," De Medici spoke suddenly, "but there is more than one reason to explain that, and there are other ways that a man can get mucilage on his face than from a false beard."

He paused and stared tiredly around him.

"I'm rather done up . . . if you don't mind, I'll turn in."

Ballau's friends looked at him with sympathy and nodded. As he passed from the room down the hallway he heard their voices continuing the monotonous discussion of the dead man's virtues—and the clews.

He had been waiting for this moment ever since Norton and his keen eyes had arrived at the apartment. The lieutenant was gone. Two dull-faced men in uniform were guarding the library. De Medici's manner underwent a change. The listlessness dropped from his face. He moved quickly toward the door behind which he knew Florence was locked. Glancing furtively up and down the hallway, he knocked softly. A stranger's voice asked:

"Who is it?"

"Mr. De Medici. Will you tell Miss Ballau I want to see her for a moment?"

"Miss Ballau is asleep."

"Wake her up, please. Tell her it's imperative. I must see her."

A pause during which De Medici heard muffled whisperings. Then Florence's voice came faintly:

"Please excuse me, Julien. I can't see you."

He tried the door-knob desperately as he answered:

"It's important, Florence. Please . . . I must tell you something."

The door was locked. De Medici rattled the knob again.

"I can't. . . . Julien. I can't see you now."

The nurse's voice added:

"She's too upset, sir. You'll have to wait till morning."

Norton again. . . . He had foreseen an attempt to talk to her. He hesitated before the door. Yes, the man's theory of suicide had been feigned. An elaborate web of sophistry to entrap him. . . .

De Medici frowned. He stood staring at the locked door. Circumstances were repeating themselves in his head. His subtle brain trained in the adventure of finely spun ideas found the situation banal. Yet there was a background, an incomprehensible background as yet unrevealed.

He repeated slowly to himself:

"Somebody called her on the telephone. She fled in answer to the call. She left the theater at nine-forty. Less than ten minutes to the apartment. Yes, I made it in ten and she was in a greater hurry than I. So it was nine-fifty when she reached the apartment. And it was ten-thirty when I entered the vestibule downstairs and saw her come out of the elevator."

He stood with his hand on the knob. His strange face became haunted with fears.

“She was in the apartment for more than a half hour,” he stood thinking. “She lied about that to Norton. She lied, too, about the telephone call.”

The locked door stared back at him.

“I must hold on to myself,” he whispered aloud.

Something had spoken in him. There was a voice, subtle and exultant, that reared itself phantom-like amid his thoughts. It was urging him to enter the locked door, to fall at the feet of the woman inside the room.

“Ah,” he mused, “she lures me. I believe her guilty . . . a murderess, a Messalina. And the fact lures me. De Medicis hail her. De Medici ghosts inside me prostrate themselves devoutly before a kinswoman—a woman whose hands are red with murder. . . . An impulse toward obeisance stirs in me.”

He shuddered at his thoughts. His head was beginning to ache. He walked to a guest-room and turned on the light. Then he remembered something.

“I found a purse in the room . . . in the chair.”

He grinned tiredly at himself in a dressing mirror.

“I must watch this duality in me,” he murmured. “She is guilty—yes, things whisper it inside me . . . I know this because I feel drawn

to her . . . to her guilt. A kinswoman for the prowling ones in me. . . .”

He studied his face in the mirror with a shiver. De Medici looked back at him. . . . Narrow, inscrutable eyes regarded him.

“Not my eyes,” he whispered.

His hands had withdrawn the purse. An ornate thing of an obsolete style. He opened it. The lining was torn inside. Folded in the bottom was a theater program. He studied it. . . . A program of “Iris,” played at the Goldsmith Theater in London in 1899 . . . a repertoire company.

He replaced the dried paper carefully and closed the purse. In the lower right-hand corner of the leather were two initials in silver—F. B.

He raised the thing to his cheek.

“Florence,” he whispered, his dark eyes flashing with a sudden excitement. “Yes,” she left the theater with her make-up on and in the costume of the ‘Dead Flower.’ And in the lobby screaming . . . when I saw her first she had changed. There was no make-up on her face—and her clothes were changed. Thirty-five minutes in which to . . . change. She lied . . . she lied.”

He sat smiling enigmatically at the purse. The subtle and exultant voice that had risen in him before the locked door was again speaking among his thoughts:

“Francesca mia, I adore you. Beautiful, cruel and silent one . . . murderess! Patricide!”

For a strange moment his heart seemed to fling itself blissfully toward the image of a woman smiling grimly, dagger in hand, in the opened doorway of his room. His eyes stared at blankness while an inner vision beheld her—Florence in a trailing robe . . . Florence with her black hair smoothed and bound with a gold band, with a dagger lifted and a dark smile wavering over the cruel face. . . .

He sprang to his feet, a cry in his throat. The doorway was empty. He stood shuddering before it, afraid to look beyond into the darkened hall, cowering before the shadow of a chair that stretched against the wall. Something had passed—a shadow had passed. With hands grown moist, he walked stiffly forward and closed out the empty space. He was alone in the room.

He stood still listening, as if there were noises to overhear. His eyes shifted about the vacancy of the room. They turned furtively from the unoccupied chairs to the empty bed.

“Fear,” he murmured. “It traps me . . . a disease. . . .”

In the fully lighted room De Medici flung himself with a sob on the bed.

CHAPTER V

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

In which the world wags its callous tongue—In which dénouements thumb their noses at each other—In which Julien De Medici succumbs to a delicious madness—A Jesuitical policeman and an ambitious coroner flirt coyly with an Enigma.

THERE was an inquest. Newspaper headlines bombarded the mystery. The grateful press panted ecstatically on the trail of clews, conjectures, romances, and revelations. A crowd filled the street in front of the fashionable Park Avenue apartment building. They stood watching officials and the spotlighted figures of mystery enter.

The Ballau apartment itself was thronged with witnesses and friends of the dead man. Coroner Holbein had taken charge of the investigation and official gathering of evidence.

The famous Ballau library had been converted into a courtroom. The melodrama of the "Crucifix Mystery"—an identity provided by some of the papers—had a setting worthy of itself. Six men summoned at random to serve as a coroner's jury sat nervously in the Renaissance chairs that had been lined up in front of the fireplace. Coroner

Holbein had taken his position behind a work-table introduced from another portion of the house. At his right side sat Lieutenant Norton and Dr. Greer.

In front of the coroner stretched an assortment of chairs occupied by friends of the dead man. The newspaper men, expectant of revelations, bristled nervously about the officials.

Coroner Holbein opened the inquest with a brief address to the jury. He was an oracular man. It was his habit, when speaking in the presence of the press, to indulge in rotund medico-legal sentences. The six blinking jurymen listened with an air of ponderous sagacity. Neither they nor the coroner seemed definitely aware of what was being said.

“It is for you gentlemen to determine whether Victor Ballau has been the victim of a foul and dastardly crime, by which I mean whether he was sought out in the sanctity of his home and assassinated by some man or woman unknown, or whether for reasons yet unknown, but which we hope this inquiry will uncover, Victor Ballau ended his own life. The case, as you no doubt have read, gentlemen, presents many baffling aspects. After you have listened to the testimony given by the various witnesses the city of New York has subpoenaed for this occasion, it will then be your duty as citizens to return a verdict determining who it was, if you have been able to discover from the

evidence, that was guilty of this foul and dastardly crime, or a verdict determining whether or not Victor Ballau, for reasons which may be unfolded here, killed himself.”

Coroner Holbein, reddened by his effort, came to an end of his pompous admonition with a flourish of his gavel. Despite his unhappy oratorical obsession he was a man of shrewd perceptions. In a business-like voice he summoned his stenographer and announced to the room that the inquest would now proceed.

“Will you take the stand, Dr. Greer?” he said. Dr. Greer arose and seated himself in the chair facing the coroner which had been provided for the witnesses. In answer to a few brief questions he described in medical language the cause of death, concluding with the words:

“Yes, in my opinion, death was caused by a shock resulting from a perforation of the heart. The perforation was caused by the introduction of a sharp steel instrument.”

There followed a short examination, in which both questions and answers seemed the product of a well rehearsed scene.

Q. “Is this dagger I now show you the dagger you removed from the body of Victor Ballau?”

A. “It is.”

Q. “To what extent had it penetrated?”

A. “The entire blade was imbedded.”

Q. "In your opinion, doctor, it would take considerable force to drive a dagger seven inches into a man's body, would it not?"

A. "It would if the point encountered any resistance. In this case, however, the blow was so placed that the weapon slid under the ribs without encountering any obstacle until it had gone its full course."

Q. "From the position of the dagger in the body, how would you say the blow had been inflicted?"

A. "That is hard to say. It may have been struck from many angles. One thing, however, is obvious. The dagger followed a slightly upward course after penetration."

Q. "What do you deduce from that, doctor?"

A. "Nothing definite can be deduced from that except that it was an upward blow."

Q. "Would a man stabbing himself inflict such a wound?"

A. "Yes, that might be. A man stabbing himself might either strike downward, or, if he knew a little of anatomy, take the more effective way of striking upward."

Q. "In your opinion, how long after the wound was inflicted did death occur?"

A. "I should say instantaneously, or at the most a matter of five or ten seconds."

Coroner Holbein beamed.

“That will be all,” he said. “Call Miss Jane Mayfield.”

Dressed in black, the gaunt housekeeper was ushered to the witness chair. She appeared bewildered as the eyes of the crowded room centered on her. Coroner Holbein, clearing his throat, assumed the manner of a friend of the weak and a staff for the unfortunate. After a series of perfunctory questions he arrived at the day of the mystery.

Q. “And now, Jane, tell us simply and in your own way what happened that afternoon and night.”

A. “Mr. Ballau was killed.”

Q. “We know that, Jane. But before he was killed what happened? What orders did he give you that afternoon?”

A. “He told me there was going to be a party. He told me to order supplies.”

Q. “How did he seem to you when he gave you these orders?”

A. “I don’t know. I don’t remember noticing anything.”

Q. “What did you do after receiving his orders?”

A. “I called the caterer around the corner and gave him Mr. Ballau’s orders and then I worked around the house fixing up.”

Q. “Did you see Mr. De Medici that day?”

A. "Yes. Mr. De Medici and Mr. Ballau were together for a while after dinner. Mr. Ballau told him to go away as he interfered with getting the party ready."

Q. "In what way did Mr. De Medici interfere, if you know, Jane?"

A. "I heard Mr. Ballau say he was too excited and that he was no use whatsoever, and to go out and walk."

A smile passed through the room at the house-keeper's words. The romance between De Medici and Ballau's daughter had received its share of spotlighting during the week that followed the tragedy. Curious ones turned their heads for a glimpse of the couple. At the side of the room, hidden behind a row of chairs, they were rewarded. Florence Ballau, her vivid face behind a veil, and Julien De Medici's green-tinted cheeks and decorative features occupied adjoining seats. They were sitting, eyes straight—unwavering and attentive.

Q. "After Mr. De Medici went away, what happened then?"

A. "I was busy. I don't remember anything."

Q. "Did you see Mr. Ballau after Mr. De Medici went away?"

A. "He came out from shaving."

Q. "Did he say anything at that time?"

A. "No."

Q. "Did you see anybody else in the apartment after you had encountered Mr. Ballau as stated?"

The housekeeper paused before answering. Her eyes swung bewilderedly toward the listeners.

A. "No."

Q. "There now, Jane. Think carefully and see if you recall having seen another man or woman in the apartment following Mr. De Medici's leaving."

Again the housekeeper stared distractedly at the crowd of listeners.

A. "No."

Q. "On the night of Mr. Ballau's death, when you were questioned by Lieutenant Norton you said that you remembered catching a glimpse of a tall man with a black beard. Have you forgotten that?"

The housekeeper regarded the coroner with frightened eyes. For several moments she remained silent.

Q. "Come, Jane, do you remember that?"

A. "Oh, yes. I remember now. I only saw him for a second. I'd forgotten about that. A tall man with a black, pointed beard."

Q. "Had you ever seen that man before?"

Tears came suddenly into the housekeeper's eyes. The coroner paused with a great show of tenderness as she dried them.

A. "I don't remember."

Q. "After you saw this man with the black beard, tell us what happened then."

A. "I was busy in the kitchen arranging the sandwiches."

Q. "What time was this?"

A. "About nine o'clock."

Q. "Did you hear any sounds in the house while you were thus busy?"

A. "No, sir."

Q. "Well, go on, then. Tell us what happened."

A. "I don't know."

Q. "If there had been any sounds in the library, sounds such as might be made by a violent struggle, would you have heard them from where you were?"

A. "Oh, yes, sir! I'm sure I would."

Q. "Do you remember when Miss Ballau returned?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "What time was it?"

The housekeeper again hesitated. The frightened expression returned to her eyes. She wavered until, turning, she encountered the attentive gaze of Florence Ballau. With a sigh she looked back at the coroner.

A. "I don't remember what time it was. I didn't look."

Q. "Did you let Miss Ballau into the apartment?"

A. "Yes. The bell rang and I answered the door."

Q. "What did Miss Ballau do or say, if anything?"

A. "I don't remember. I was busy. I went right back to the kitchen."

Q. "Then what happened?"

A. "When I got into the kitchen I heard Miss Ballau screaming and I rushed out in the hall. Miss Ballau was standing in the library door and screaming about her father."

Q. "Just what did she say?"

A. "I don't remember. She was screaming. I went in and saw Mr. Ballau on the floor. I began to cry. . . . I don't remember. . . ."

Q. "Come now, Jane, pull yourself together. Do you remember how Mr. Ballau was lying?"

A. "On his back."

Q. "Did you notice anything odd about the room?"

A. "Yes, it was all torn up."

Q. "Did you notice whether a candle was burning in a candlestick beside the head of the dead man?"

The housekeeper stared speechlessly at the coroner. The question had sent a shiver through

the crowd. The hollow eyes of the woman widened. She spoke in a low voice.

A. "I didn't notice any candle burning."

Q. "Did you ever hear anyone quarreling with Mr. Ballau?"

A. "No."

Q. "How did Mr. Ballau treat you?"

The housekeeper failed to answer. She was looking slowly around the room. Suddenly, with a cry, she fell forward. Her head lay on the table as the sound of hysterical weeping filled the place.

"That will be all, thank you," said the coroner. A policeman assisted Jane to her feet and led her sobbing from the room.

"Call Mr. Donovan," ordered the coroner.

Donovan, the doorman of the Hudson Apartments, in which building the dead man had lived, took his place stolidly in the witness chair. Under questioning he identified himself and his vocation.

Q. "Mr. Donovan, you were on duty, were you not, on the night Mr. Ballau met his death?"

A. "Yes, sir; I was that."

Q. "Were you acquainted with the dead man?"

A. "Indeed, when he was alive I was well acquainted with him. I'd known Mr. Ballau for years, and a very fine man he was."

Q. "Did you know most of the people who came to visit Mr. Ballau?"

A. "I did that. I knew most of them."

Q. "Between the hours of seven and ten-thirty on the night Mr. Ballau was found dead, do you know who came into the building?"

A. "Well, now, I remember there was some of the residents came in."

Q. "I mean, did you notice any strangers enter or any people you knew to be friends of Mr. Ballau?"

A. "No, sir. There was only Miss Ballau and the gentleman, Mr. De Medici, your honor."

Q. "Did you see Miss Ballau come in?"

A. "That's what I'm saying, sir. There was the young lady and . . ."

Q. "What time was it when Miss Ballau entered the building?"

A. "To tell the truth, sir, I didn't notice exactly. My watch had stopped the day before and I had it at the repairer's. . . ."

Q. "Can you tell approximately what time it was?"

A. "Well, it was after being middlin' late. Around ten o'clock, I should say, or thereafter somewhat."

Q. "Did you pay any attention to Miss Ballau when she came in?"

A. "No, I wasn't very attentive, your honor. I was only for noticing it was her and that's all."

Q. "Did you see a man with a black beard enter the apartment that night?"

A. "I did not. I don't remember if there was."

Q. "Did you know any man with a black beard who ever called on Mr. Ballau?"

A. "Well, now, there was Dr. Lytton, who used to come often, and he had a black beard, but he got rid of it a month ago."

Q. "He got rid of it. In what way?"

A. "By shaving, your honor, I presume. Leastways I was hardly for recognizing him when he came around without it."

Q. "Do you see Dr. Lytton in the room, Donovan?"

A short, thick-set, bull-necked man with a glistening bald head stood up near the wall.

A. "There's the gentleman himself, your honor."

Coroner Holbein regarded the standing man.

"Thank you, Dr. Lytton," he said.

Q. "Did you see Dr. Lytton the night Mr. Ballau was found dead, the night of April 10th?"

A. "No, sir, I did not."

Q. "Did you see Mr. De Medici come in that night?"

A. "I don't recall, to be exact, your honor. I

remember I heard the young lady screaming and that it was Mr. De Medici holding her in his arms and telling me to call the police."

"That will be all, thank you," the coroner nodded.

De Medici's eyes narrowed and a derisive smile passed over his wide, thin mouth. He had followed the questions and answers with rigid attentiveness.

"A terrible dolt, this man. Or in on the trap," he mused. "But it isn't over. They've got something hidden. Yet he didn't ask Donovan the question. The answer would have started things. How long after she came in from the street did he see her in my arms? Thirty or forty minutes later. . . . He would have remembered if asked. And what was she doing in the apartment those thirty or forty minutes?"

Five days had passed since the death of his friend and a curious change had come over De Medici. His hand trembled as he dropped it furtively on the gloved fingers of the girl at his side. She ignored the caress. A laceration passed through his heart.

"Cold, aloof and defiant," he mused with a shudder. "She sits next to me like an image of stone. This little hand I touch is the hand that murdered. Yet it lies calmly in a snug glove under my fingers. It is I who tremble. This thing grows in me. The

feeling of her guilt overwhelms me. Her cruelty is like the promise of a caress. I bow before it."

Again a shudder stirred him.

"Incredible," he went on silently. "There is a mystery. She could not sit like this if there was a memory of guilt in her. And yet she lies. She avoids me. If it was I who had killed him . . . yes, I could sit like this. Calm, amused and cold."

De Medici sighed. He had for the week followed the circle of his thoughts. The shuddering and exultant thing that had risen in him on the night before the locked door had obliterated, almost, his curiosity concerning the crime. Shrinking from himself, despising the evil infatuation that the conviction of her guilt was developing in him, he had felt himself being slowly dragged into a dark region of himself. Alone in his rooms he had sat through the nights musing:

"Ah, I'm changing. I feel myself losing the identity of Julien De Medici. The phantoms come closer to my brain. They knock warily at my heart. . . ."

He released the unresponsive hand of the girl as the coroner raised his voice.

"Call Mr. Philip Johnson."

A well-dressed, quick-mannered man, middle-aged and important-aired, stepped forward and took his place in the witness chair. He identified

himself as a broker on the stock exchange. The coroner proceeded.

Q. "You were intimately acquainted with the deceased, were you not?"

A. "I was."

Q. "In what capacity did you know him?"

A. "We were friends and I handled a great part of his business dealings and investments."

Q. "What was the nature of these investments?"

A. "Stock investments, chiefly."

Q. "You mean Mr. Ballau played the stock market?"

A. "Yes, sir."

Q. "How much money did Mr. Ballau invest through you during the last few years?"

A. "I have looked over my books and find that Mr. Ballau invested something like \$350,000 in the last year and a half."

Q. "And what became of these investments?"

A. "Mr. Ballau was unfortunate. The money was entirely lost as a result of several unforeseen flurries on the market."

Q. "Then you wish us to understand that Mr. Ballau in the course of a year and a half lost \$350,000 as a result of stock market fluctuations?"

A. "Yes, sir."

Q. "Did Mr. Ballau appear oppressed over his loss or did he so express himself at any time?"

A. "Yes, he took the matter keenly to heart. Towards the end he seemed to lose some of the conservatism which usually marked his business investments and tried frantically to recover what he had lost. Against my advice he invested in speculative securities."

Q. "Did Mr. Ballau, during any conversation with you, express himself as overwhelmed by his losses and reveal in any way that he was brooding over them?"

A. "Mr. Ballau took his losses without any complaint. He kept his emotions to himself. But from the way he acted and from many things I saw, I felt certain that he was frantic."

"Thank you, sir," said the coroner. "That will be all. Call Mr. William Stone."

A stout, genial-looking man took the witness chair and under questioning identified himself as an attorney.

Q. "You were Mr. Ballau's lawyer, were you not; retained by him to handle his estate and whatever litigation arose?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "Mr. Ballau left a will, did he not?"

A. "He did."

Q. "When did he make out this will?"

A. "Eight days ago. April 2nd."

Q. "Did Mr. Ballau have a will previous to the

drawing up of this will that you testify took place April 2nd, or eight days before his death?"

A. "He did. When I was first retained as legal adviser by Mr. Ballau some nine years ago, he entrusted to my keeping, among other papers, his last will and testament."

Q. "When Mr. Ballau made out his new will on April 2nd was this other will destroyed?"

A. "It was."

Q. "Who destroyed it?"

A. "Mr. Ballau did."

Q. "Do you remember what was in that will and what disposition of his property Mr. Ballau had made in it? I refer to the first will."

A. "I never saw that will. It was handed to me sealed and I kept it in Mr. Ballau's box along with other papers until he asked for it eight days ago. I gave it to him and he tore it up without looking at it."

Q. "He tore it up. I see. And what did he do with the pieces?"

A. "It was at his home. There was a fire burning in the room and he threw the pieces in the fire."

Q. "And then you drew up the second will?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "Has that second will been probated yet?"

A. "No sir."

Q. "Do you desire at this time to divulge its contents?"

A. "There is little to divulge. Mr. Ballau merely dictated a memorandum bequeathing all his property and holdings in the event of his death to Miss Florence Ballau, his daughter."

Q. "Was she present when the will was drawn up?"

A. "She was."

Q. "Are you in a position to know the extent of Mr. Ballau's holdings?"

A. "I am."

Q. "Tell us, then, to the best of your knowledge, how large an estate Mr. Ballau left behind."

A. "He left nothing behind. As far as I have been able to find out, he was heavily in debt at the time of his death. His present possessions, if sold, would barely pay for the chattel mortgages and loans. He was penniless when he died."

Q. "Do you know whether he was insured?"

A. "Yes. Mr. Ballau was insured for \$150,000."

Q. "Do you know what kind of a policy he held?"

A. "A straight death insurance policy collectable in the event of his demise."

Q. "Is there a suicide clause in that policy, Mr. Stone?"

A. "I believe there is. I believe that the pol-

icy provides that its conditions shall be null and void in the event of its holder taking his own life.”

Q. “Has any effort been made to collect that insurance?”

A. “None whatsoever, sir.”

“Thank you,” beamed the coroner. “Call Mr. Meyerson.”

Mr. Meyerson walked to the witness chair. Following the introductory questions the coroner proceeded.

Q. “You frequently sold antiques to Mr. Ballau during his life, did you not, Mr. Meyerson?”

A. “Yes.”

Q. “How are his accounts now? I mean, has he paid you his bills and was he in the habit of paying regularly, or do your books show that his estate is indebted to you?”

A. “Mr. Ballau owed me \$12,000 at the time of his death.”

Q. “Did you ever press for payment of this money?”

A. “During my fifteen years of dealing with Mr. Ballau I have never sent him a bill.”

Q. “What was the last thing Mr. Ballau bought from you?”

A. “My books show that on March 28th Mr. Ballau purchased a Florentine dagger which

formed a part of the famous De Medici collection in my keeping."

Q. "Is this the dagger which Mr. Ballau purchased from you on March 28th?"

The coroner held aloft the slim weapon which had been found protruding from Victor Ballau's heart.

A. "Yes, without a doubt."

Q. "Were you there when the purchase was made?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "What was said at the time?"

A. "We discussed the dagger. Mr. Ballau was always a collector. I remember his enthusiasm over the weapon. He declared it an excellent piece of workmanship and wondered over its history."

Q. "What did you say, Mr. Meyerson?"

A. "We discussed the sinister history which undoubtedly was attached to the dagger. It had been, according to my information, one of the weapons Catherine De Medici carried into France with her. As such it had unquestionably been in many a bloody drama."

Q. "Was Mr. Ballau alone when the purchase was made?"

A. "He came in alone but as we were talking Julien De Medici entered. He joined us in our

discussion over the weapon, contributing to its sinister and romantic past.”

Q. “What, exactly, if you remember, did Mr. De Medici say?”

A. “I recall that he humorously bewailed the habits of his great-great-grandmother and added that if he had enough money he would buy the entire De Medici collection in my keeping and drop it in the middle of the Atlantic.”

“That will be all, Mr. Meyerson,” said the coroner. “Call Miss Florence Ballau.”

CHAPTER VI

LABYRINTHS OF BLOOD

In which a detective attaches a pair of asses' ears to his head—In which Julien De Medici removes for a moment a mask—In which a glimpse, incredible and disturbing, is caught of the soul of Florence Ballau—Who blew out the candle of the salamanders?

A CLIMAX! Florence Ballau. . . . There had been innuendoes in the press. She arose—a figure out of the depths of melodrama. Her black attire, the tilted and somber hat that shadowed her face—the night-flower face that had captured Broadway. . . .

“As beautiful and imperious as a somnambulist,” mused De Medici. He felt his heart move after her as she left her seat. “And now they will uncover their little traps.”

His eyes turned fearfully to the silent and reddish Lieutenant Norton.

“An amiable spider,” he shivered, “he waits for her. And she . . . dear God . . . she will walk slowly and aloofly into his hands.”

The room was stirring with excitement. Murmurs arose around him.

“Later . . . later,” De Medici whispered to

himself. A warm enervation was sweeping him. "My love makes a stranger out of me," he went on. "Ah, Francesca mia. Cruel and beautiful Francesca. . . ."

He sat smiling furtively as the figure of Florence Ballau lowered itself gracefully into the witness chair. His eyes, narrowed and inscrutable, followed the vibrant line of her body.

"We will not detain you long," the coroner began, affecting a heavily cavalierly manner. "But it is necessary for the purposes of this record to learn from you again the story of your finding your father's body. Do you wish to testify?"

The young woman nodded once, answering in a soft contralto, "Yes."

The examination proceeded.

Q. "You were engaged, at the time of your father's death, to marry Mr. Julien De Medici, were you not?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "And the party your father was giving was in the nature of a formal announcement of the engagement, I take it?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "When did you last see your father alive?"

A. "In the morning."

Q. "How did he seem?"

A. "He was depressed . . . and sad."

Q. "What gave you that impression?"

A. "We talked. He told me he was ruined. He said that he had been wiped out on the stock market and that we were penniless and would have to sell all we owned to meet our debts."

Q. "Your father was devoted to his collections—his antiques and books, was he not?"

A. "Yes. They were his life."

Q. "Tell us, if you will, what else did your father say to you on the morning of April 10th?"

A. "He said he was sorry to have brought this on just as my career was beginning. He said he had put his last money into the play in which I was acting and that it, too, seemed likely to fail him."

Q. "Do you recall what you said in reply, Miss Ballau?"

A. "Yes. I told him it didn't matter. But he refused to be consoled. He said it was not the money but the parting with the beautiful things he had loved all his life."

Q. "Did he make any threats against his own life at the time?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "What did he say?"

A. "He spoke of his insurance. He said that there came a time in every man's life when he was worth more dead than alive."

Q. "What reply did you make to that?"

A. "I kissed him and begged him not to be

absurd. I told him that I loved him. Then I said good-bye and went to keep my appointment with Mr. De Medici."

Q. "Did you see your father alive after that?"

A. "No."

Q. "What time did you leave the theater?"

A. "I don't remember. It was after the second act. I had a frightful headache and the worry over what father had told me, added to the excitement of the morning—I had promised to marry Mr. De Medici—upset me too much to finish the play. I asked the stage manager to call my understudy and left the theater."

Q. "Did you go straight home?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "What time did you reach the apartment?"

A. "I don't know. I went straight up in the elevator, intending to take a nap before the party started."

Q. "Do you usually carry a key to your apartment?"

A. "I had one until several weeks ago. I lost it."

Q. "So you rang and the housekeeper let you in?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "What was her demeanor when she opened the door?"

A. "I noticed nothing about her. She was not disturbed."

Q. "What did you do after you entered the apartment?"

A. "I removed my wraps and opened the door to the library."

Q. "Did you go into your room first?"

A. "No."

Q. "What did you see when you entered the library?"

A. "That my father had been murdered."

Q. "Were the lights on?"

A. "No."

Q. "What did you do?"

A. "He was lying on the floor on his back. I saw the dagger-handle. I stood looking at him. Then I screamed."

Q. "Did you notice anything else unusual?"

A. "An ebony crucifix was on his body."

Q. "Anything else?"

A. "A candle was standing by his head."

Q. "Was it lighted?"

A. "No."

Q. "You are positive of that? Or is it possible that in your grief and excitement you may have blown it out?"

A. "It was unlighted. There was only moonlight in the room."

Q. "You screamed and rushed out to give the alarm?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "Have you any theory as to how your father met his death?"

A. "I think . . . he killed himself."

"That will be all, Miss Ballau," the coroner announced.

She arose and steadied herself for a moment with her fingers on the edge of the table. The eyes of De Medici remained on her. She walked slowly back to the chair beside him. The coroner and Lieutenant Norton were conferring.

"Inconceivable imbeciles," De Medici's musing began again. "They let her go. They had only to confront her with the telephone call. Cort must have told them, as he told me. And her flight from the theater. Either they have neither eyes nor intelligence . . . or they wait. Ah, he looks at me. Next . . . yes, they will ask me questions now. There was blood on my hands when the detective came in. I must remember to explain about that. Hm, they keep whispering. They know something. About whom?"

His eyes turned slowly toward Florence. He would speak to her. Had she forgotten that he loved her, that his heart was at her feet? Yes, she was cold. Even in the cab. . . . She had spoken calmly, almost indifferently, during their

ride. But her arms had come around him. A kiss—a long, burning kiss.

A shudder of delight confused the memory. He heard his name called. He stood up and walked to the chair, his brain clear again. He was calm.

“I must be careful,” his thought continued as he approached the table. “They are waiting with something . . . I must not corroborate the suicide. They know better. It’s part of a plan . . . against her.”

He bowed stiffly to the coroner and sat down. He leaned back in the chair, his hands folded in his lap, and answered the opening questions with precision. Having established his identity and his connection with the Ballau family, the coroner proceeded.

Q. “Now tell us, Mr. De Medici, when you last saw Mr. Ballau alive.”

A. “It was around eight o’clock that evening.”

Q. “What was he doing?”

A. “He was telephoning people to come to the supper.”

Q. “How did he impress you with regard to his state of mind?”

A. “He was in good spirits. He was pleased that I had obtained Miss Ballau’s consent to marry me. He seemed as happy as myself.”

Q. “And you left the apartment around eight?”

A. "Yes."

Q. "Where did you go?"

A. "I walked in Broadway for an hour, dropped in at the Rienza for a bite of food, and then went to call for Miss Ballau at the theater."

Q. "What time was that?"

It would be necessary to lie here. But he must be careful and evasive wherever possible.

A. "It was twenty minutes after ten."

Q. "Did you see Miss Ballau?"

A. "No, she had just left."

Q. "Did you ask any questions of anyone?"

Ah, they had Cort up their sleeve. They would produce him next and confound him with the man's testimony. De Medici's eyes glanced slowly around the room as if in quest of a memory. Cort was not to be seen.

A. "I don't remember to whom I spoke. I recall asking someone where Miss Ballau was and they told me she had left."

Q. "Did you think it strange that Miss Ballau should leave the theater in the middle of the show?"

Ah, now they were closing in. His eyes rested intently upon the reddish face of Lieutenant Norton. The man was watching him, as he had watched him that night in the apartment.

A. "Yes, I thought it odd. But I knew Miss Ballau was under mental stress."

Q. "What sort of mental stress?"

A. "She had been distracted in the morning when we rode in a cab together and I asked her to marry me. She had told me about her father. She was worried over him and she had complained of a headache."

Simple lies, establishing nothing. De Medici glanced at his hands. Would they ask him about the blood on his fingers?

Q. "Do you think that Mr. Ballau committed suicide, from what you saw that night?"

A. "No."

Q. "Then it is your opinion that Mr. Ballau was murdered?"

A. "Yes."

De Medici waited while the coroner made notes with a pencil. Curious that he should make notes at that moment. And why had they asked him for his opinion? They had asked none of the others. Norton again. Yes, it was Norton. The coroner with his pompous words and heavy manner was a blind. It was the reddish-faced man beside him who was operating the web . . . spinning it out carefully and invisibly. Well, he would cross weapons with the man.

"I must find out what the fellow is," mused De Medici behind the attentive poise of his face.

Q. "Have you any idea from your observa-

tions, Mr. De Medici, by whom the dead man was murdered?"

A. "Not yet."

Q. "You were present with Lieutenant Norton in the library when the first examination was made?"

A. "I was."

Q. "What time did you arrive at the Ballau apartment?"

A. "I don't recall the exact time."

Q. "Did Miss Ballau have her hat on when she came out of the elevator as you entered the lobby?"

A. "No."

Q. "How was she dressed?"

Then they knew about the costume!

A. "I don't remember. I failed to notice."

Q. "What gave you the impression that murder had been committed?"

A. "It was obvious. The room was in disorder."

Q. "You discussed the case at the time with Lieutenant Norton?"

A. "Yes. I am aware of his theory."

De Medici surprised a look of amusement in the detective's face. An irritation came into his nerves. Yes, they were playing, peering out amusedly from behind concealed evidence.

"May I speak openly?" De Medici inquired.

He had leaned forward in his chair. He caught a nod from the lieutenant. The coroner answered:

“Yes. Go on and tell us in your own way what you believe happened. We want to get at the bottom of this mystery and if you have any ideas as a result of what you know we will be glad to hear them.”

“From the questions that were asked Miss Ballau,” De Medici began, his eyes fixed on the lieutenant, “it struck me that one of the police theories might be that Miss Ballau killed her father in order to profit by his insurance money, knowing at the time that they were financially ruined. This is obviously a ridiculous notion. For Miss Ballau has testified from the first that she is convinced her father committed suicide. Inasmuch as she knows that if this is proved the insurance company will not have to pay her the money that is collectable if Mr. Ballau was murdered, the theory becomes untenable.”

“I see,” said the coroner. “But we have not as yet made any remarks or comments which might be construed as supporting such a theory.”

Lieutenant Norton leaned forward and spoke for the first time.

“Have you any particular interest in proving that a murder has been committed instead of suicide?” he asked.

“I see what you mean,” De Medici smiled

slowly. "I am engaged to marry Miss Ballau and you think I have a personal interest in securing the collection of the insurance money left by her father. I have no such interest. I knew Mr. Ballau as well as I know anybody in the world. Had he decided to kill himself and conceal the fact, he would have done so in an intelligent manner."

"We discussed that once," smiled the detective. De Medici nodded. The coroner, after a pause, continued his questioning.

Q. "You heard Mr. Meyerson testify concerning the purchase of the dagger found in Mr. Ballau's body."

A. "Yes."

Q. "Did you have any discussion with Mr. Ballau concerning the weapon after he had taken it home?"

A charming theory and worthy of a more romantic-looking person than the reddish-faced Norton. De Medici smiled appreciatively at the detective.

A. "I think we did talk about it."

Q. "On that night in the library you asked Lieutenant Norton whether he had observed any finger-prints on the hilt, did you not?"

A. "Yes."

Q. "What did you say to Mr. Ballau concerning the dagger?"

A. "I told him I didn't like it. It had belonged to an ancestor of mine whose deeds I have never admired."

Q. "You have a revulsion toward such things—daggers of that kind, I take it?"

A. "I fancy I have."

Q. "Yet you touched it when you leaned over the body of Mr. Ballau?"

De Medici stared again at the detective. A memory focused vividly in his mind. The dead body, the dagger hilt, the moment he had reached forward to embrace the protruding thing in his fingers—the moment of fascination that had left him shuddering. Ah, this reddish-faced man was not stupid. He had surmised that.

A. "I thought of withdrawing the blade from the body but stopped as my fingers encountered it."

"That will be all," the coroner announced.

De Medici arose and returned to his seat beside Florence. The coroner and Lieutenant Norton were conferring in whispers again.

"The inquest is a farce," De Medici mused. "They have determined on this clumsy ruse of throwing someone off guard as I thought that night."

Lieutenant Norton, summoned to the witness chair, was reciting again the details of the case. De Medici listened. With logic and a remarkably

convincing mass of detail, the detective was going over the circumstances surrounding the death of Victor Ballau, and bit by bit reconstructing for the jury his theory of the grotesque suicide which the dead man had committed. He added to his theory the motive that had been brought out by the witnesses, the dead man's financial difficulties, the changing of his will, his purchase of the dagger.

"The inquest stands adjourned until tomorrow," Coroner Holbein announced as the lieutenant concluded.

De Medici remained, without moving, beside the girl. A respite. Nothing had happened. There would be no damning headlines in the press. His eyes studied the face of the girl. She was in danger. The clumsy evasions of the officials were ominous.

"Come," he whispered, "I would like to talk to you."

They made their way through the crowd of friends. De Medici nodded politely in return to the greetings that followed his passage through the room. Norton was watching them, watching them go out together. There would be someone listening when they talked. De Medici leaned close to her ear.

"We must get away. Alone."

She nodded.

"The theater," he whispered.

It would be empty. Seated on the empty stage facing the vacant seats, they could be certain of not being overheard.

"You have avoided me," he said as they walked in the street.

"Yes."

They continued in silence. The morning was brisk. Inside the theater, he led the way to the stage. The curtain was up. The scenery for the first act of his play was in place—dungeon walls and a single door at the rear.

"We've probably been followed," he said softly as they sat down in two chairs near the dark footlights. "But we can talk easily here."

"What do you want?"

"I love you," he whispered. "You have forgotten that."

"No."

"Yet you hide from me."

"What do you want?" she repeated.

"To warn you," he whispered. "They know about the telephone call. And about the time you spent in the apartment."

"Yes."

"Tell me . . ."

His voice was soft. His hand sought hers.

"Ah, Francesca mia, do you think I care? Does it matter to me? Look at me. Do my eyes hide

from you? I adore you. Tell me . . . and I will fall at your feet. I will kiss your hands. . . .”

“That I killed him?” Her voice was low in a question.

“Whatever you wish. Only tell me so I can love you.”

“You are strange.”

“I am mad with desire for you. Nothing matters to me but that my heart bows before you.”

“You believe I killed him?”

“I want to save you. They know all I know. We must circumvent them.”

“What else do you know?”

“I found a purse in the chair that night,” he whispered. “With your initials on it.”

“Give it to me.” She held out her hand. He shook his head.

“First you must tell me what you know. Then I will obey you blindly.”

“There is nothing to tell.”

De Medici smiled at her.

“Someone called you on the telephone,” he said softly. “And you answered, ‘Oh, God!’ and fled. You were in the apartment for a half hour or more before you gave the alarm. And you removed your costume—the ‘Dead Flower’ costume—which you had worn out of the theater. You . . . you washed your hands and face—for there was no make-up on you when I saw you in the vestibule. . . .”

GALLATÉ
SWITZ



His arm had circled her as he talked, his voice had grown warm.

"Francesca mia!" he cried suddenly. He had raised her to her feet, and drawn her passionately against him. He spoke with his lips close to her.

"It is I who am evil. Since that night you have been an enigma luring me. I loved you before. But now something else in me worships before you. Oh, my adored one, my beautiful, cruel one. Tell me . . . I will love you more . . . I will share it with you. . . ."

He felt her body stiffen as his arms tightened. Under his burning eyes her face had grown white. She stared at him with sudden horror.

"Look at you!" she cried. "God in heaven! You are mad!"

"Francesca mia!" he was shouting.

"Let me go!"

Her arms wrenched themselves free. For a moment he held her writhing body. Then her hand stung against his face. His head recoiled under the blow. She stood apart from him, despair and anguish on her face.

"Oh, dear God, there is no one . . . no one," she cried.

De Medici's eyes watched her aloofly as she sank to the floor and lay sobbing and whimpering at his feet.

"She acts," he whispered, "she acts. . . ."

CHAPTER VII

THE HAUNTED ROOM

In which an apoplectic scientist explodes—In which invisible footsteps sound in a dark corridor—In which Julien De Medici opens a letter—The woman of the hidden eyes—Floria, the lady of the dagger, appears—In which underworlds collide—The staircase to Hell and a strange passion—A voice that spoke over the telephone.

TALL, wine-colored velvets fell in monotonous parallels from the ceiling to the floor. There were no windows to be seen. A somber and luxurious emptiness like the inside of a jewel box stamped the curious chamber.

Four black candlesticks ending in little pyramids of flame stood on the long table in the center. The four little flames glistened like suspended medallions. The towering drapes that enclosed the room broke the darkness into thin and motionless waves. The shadows reaching toward the burning candles seemed to beat with an invisible and inaudible rhythm.

Julien De Medici, his narrow eyes half shut, sat watching the dungeon lights that flitted over the face of Dr. Lytton. The doctor's bald head loomed ghostlike above the table. His black eyes were

peering wrathfully at his half visible host. He was talking in a voice alive with indignation.

“Bring some lights into this confounded place. This sort of thing is at the bottom of your trouble, Julien.”

He waved his short hand in the air and a great shadow lifted itself to the ceiling.

“You’re deliberately submitting yourself to a dangerous hypnosis. The wraiths of past De Medicis! Inherited phantoms. Bosh!”

The scientist snorted and brought a fist down on the table.

“Hypnosis, I tell you. A cleverly induced mania as artificial as this damned room. Wake up, man. There’s nothing wrong with you except a stupid, —yes, sir, a damnably deliberate effort to make a fool out of yourself. You’re as sound mentally as I am.”

“Thanks.”

The soft voice of De Medici came out of the shadows. His choler growing, the doctor continued:

“Why don’t you try crystal-gazing? Sitting in a room like this, candlesticks, darkness, drapes, and bombarding yourself with the fancy that you’re someone else! What do you expect? Something is bound to happen if you keep it up long enough.”

“I am satisfied.”

The soft calm of De Medici's voice seemed to infuriate his friend.

"And you claim to be in love with Florence," he cried. "Yet you haven't made a move to help her. They'll close in on her any day now. We've got to do something. Come now, I want to talk to you. Do you think her innocent?"

"I prefer her guilty," De Medici whispered.

"Hm," the scientist grunted. He sat stroking his heavy face. "Monomania," he muttered as if to himself. He raised his voice. "What form do these idiotic delusions of yours take?"

Glaring into the shadows he waited for De Medici's words. They came languidly out of the darkness—

"Neither delusion nor idiocy, Hugo. She unquestionably murdered her father. And I find the situation to my liking."

Dr. Lytton was on his feet. He walked swiftly to the side of De Medici and seized his shoulder.

"I came here to talk to you chiefly about her," he said. "Ballau was my dear friend."

De Medici's eyes remained intently on the shadowed curtains.

"I know, I know," he whispered. "You've been working hard. And you've found out what I know. You've found it was Florence."

"Can you drag yourself out of your delusions long enough to think sanely?" the doctor cried.

"My mind is perfectly clear," De Medici answered. He lighted a cigarette in the half dark, his eyes watching the glow of the tobacco. "You have discovered that someone telephoned her at the theater, that she was in the apartment more than a half hour before giving the alarm. And other details."

"Yes, other details," Dr. Lytton repeated warily. De Medici sighed.

"You've interrupted a charming dream," he said, rising from the chair. His hand passed tiredly over his forehead. The scientist regarded him closely. He saw the lean face of his host shudder and the gleaming eyes close for a moment.

"Ah," continued De Medici in a murmur, "it comes over me like that. A dream obliterates me. I sit and watch myself from a distance." He smiled wearily at his friend. "Are you interested in my symptoms, Hugo?"

"Go on," the doctor answered.

"From a distance," repeated De Medici, "my gestures seem to change. They become slower. And my jaw shifts curiously to a side. My eyes droop and I keep staring out of their corners. The fears leave me, however. There is nothing to fear in this dream. Last night I sat there staring at the curtains and waiting. But there was no fear. And finally the hallucination came. As it did once before on the night of the murder. I

was in the apartment and she appeared for an instant in the doorway. The Francesca one . . . her hair down and a band circling her forehead. I knew last night she would come again. And she did. I sat looking at Florence—a Florence you don't know. . . . Cold, cruel with a wild gleam to her. . . . A long robe and a dagger in her hand. She smiles at me and I feel my heart dissolve with rapture. The dream is horrible and beautiful. An exultation comes into me."

"And are you aware of its unreality at the moment?" Dr. Lytton asked quietly.

"Alas, yes! I watch from a distance. I repeat to myself—'a hallucination.' But even then there is something truthful about her. Even though I know I dream the image, it appears to me as psychologically true. The woman with the dagger is Florence. . . ."

De Medici moved slowly down the room. As he stood against the darkened curtains, his face glowed uncertainly toward the doctor.

"We must save her," he whispered.

Dr. Lytton grunted.

"Yes," he agreed, "if you can keep your head clear of these obsessions of yours. Yet——" He paused and stared at De Medici. "Curious," he resumed. "It fits in. That vision of yours. Yes, an odd psychological phenomenon. I have had a similar image in my mind for a week."

De Medici's voice had undergone a change when he spoke again. It was crisp and with a precision in its sound.

"Now tell me, Hugo," he asked, "what you've found."

"First," countered the doctor, "what are you hiding? Your consciousness of her guilt is not as pathologic as you would make out. The telephone call and all the rest are good enough. But you were there that night. The first to see her. You saw something . . . found something."

De Medici nodded as the doctor's eyes glittered at him. Moving to the table he opened a drawer and removed the purse he had picked up in the Ballau library.

"In the chair near the body," he explained. "It has her initials in the corner. And inside a theater program for a performance of 'Iris' in a London theater in 1899."

Dr. Lytton reached for the object with an exclamation. His hands seized it and, thrusting it into the light of the candles, he remained lost in an ecstatic contemplation of it.

"Good God!" he muttered abruptly. "I knew it. Yes, I was right."

De Medici smiled slowly at the scientist's elation.

"A brain," he thought. "It plays with a delightful puzzle. He knows something." There

flitted through his mind the memory of Dr. Lytton's accomplishments. . . . An exuberant modernist among the pathologists of the country. . . . "He came here to corroborate something," he continued musing: "He suspects that I and not Florence did the murder. Yes, an obvious and romantic theory. Even Norton played with it at the inquest. I turned De Medici for a moment and killed a man. . . . Inherited homicidal mania . . . hm."

"An odd thing about Ballau," Dr. Lytton was saying. He had seated himself and was copying something from the program. He talked cheerfully as he wrote. "A man like Ballau without a breath of scandal about his name. Rather strange, don't you think? A lover of beautiful things. Unmarried, with no restrictions. And yet not the sign of a woman or of an affair in his life. I've talked to a dozen people who knew him as well as I did. All collaborate on a halo for the man. And thereby hangs an idea. Virtue, no less than vice, has its pathologic mainsprings, eh?"

His eyes beamed excitedly over the program.

"Twelve names in the cast," he continued. "I'm taking them down. Names are always something. A name is a beginning. Did you tell Florence of this?"

"Yes."

"And she grew excited," pursued Dr. Lyt-

ton as he finished his writing. "Did you mention the Goldsmith Theater to her?"

"No."

"She wanted the thing back, eh? Come, what did she say? How did she look?"

"As you said," De Medici answered. "Excited. Disturbed."

"This was before she left town?" pursued Dr. Lytton. "Of course. . . . You saw her after the inquest. She left that night."

"I didn't know," De Medici murmured.

"Yes," Dr. Lytton continued, "she went to a place called Rollo, in Maine. A curious out-of-the-way little village. I found this out the next day. She had had her trunks shipped there. The grief and excitement, I suppose. And a desire to get away."

"I didn't know," repeated De Medici uncomfortably. So she had gone away! A bewilderment came into his thought. He recalled her rage that had ended their talk in the theater. The blow she had struck and her anguish. Remorse and tenderness overwhelmed him, and a feeling of self-revulsion. What a scoundrel! Playing with evil dreams while her heart was breaking. "No one . . . no one," she had wailed. Yes, he had abandoned her. Become a useless and fantastic actor in the hour she needed him. And she had fled. . . .

The tragedy suddenly changed in his inner

mind. The image of the evil Francesca which had confused itself with his memories of Florence seemed to evaporate from the recesses of his thought. He saw, in retrospect suddenly, the laughing-eyed, vivid young woman whom he had loved. Guilty of the murder of her father! Incredible! He had been playing viciously with a dangerous make-believe. Yes, there was something else. A mystery beckoned behind the inexplicable conduct of the girl. He had succumbed to a few obvious leads. Now, with his mind cleared of the phantoms that had seduced him, he remembered the dead man. Victor Ballau . . . there had been something about him. Trembling fingers and averted eyes. . . . A secret pantomiming behind the fastidious exterior.

Dr. Lytton was talking. De Medici's ears again picked up the man's excited ramblings.

"In part the mystery lies with Ballau. A London theater program. You know he lived in London before he came here. I found out something about him. He was married in London. Have you ever talked to Florence about her mother, Julien? Never mind, we'll come to that later. This purse fits in. I wanted only a peg to hang the thing on. Here it is. . . ."

Dr. Lytton waved the paper on which he had copied the names.

"Names are mysteries in themselves. . . ."

He paused and glanced quickly around the room.

"Someone's knocking, Julien," he exclaimed.

A muffled sound was repeated.

"It's the door," De Medici smiled at the doctor's unexpected nerves. "Come in, Harding."

Harding, his bland-faced valet, entered.

"A special-delivery letter," he said.

"Thanks." De Medici took the proffered envelope. The valet stepped through the curtains.

"Look out," Dr. Lytton cried as De Medici's fingers began to tear open the letter. "Postmarks are important."

He watched De Medici's eyes grow narrow and an expression of horror slowly consume his shadowed face. He had removed a sheet of paper from the envelope. The thing lay in his fingers and cast a distorted shadow across the table. There followed a moment of silence.

"Dear God!" the voice of De Medici came softly. He had become rigid. His face had grown into a somber and elongated mask. For the moment he stood motionless, his eyes staring. Terror, blank and wordless, gleamed in the look of his eyes.

Dr. Lytton sprang to his side. De Medici had wavered and stumbled against the table edge. His hand shot out, fingers spread, in a gesture of horror toward the fluttering shadows on the curtains.

"She . . . she!" he cried. "From the thing with the dagger. . . ."

The doctor stooped and picked up the paper that had dropped from his hands. Holding it quickly under the rays of the candles he read:

Prince Julien De Medici,

I write to let you know that your meddlesome interest in my affairs is distasteful. You will allow the matter to drop or incur the anger of one who knows how to deal with a De Medici. I am,

Your humble servant,

FLORIA.

Underneath the signature was a crude drawing in ink of a dagger.

"Floria," muttered Dr. Lytton.

De Medici's face, gray in the candle-light, was regarding him.

"What was the postmark?" the doctor asked quietly.

"Rollo, Maine," De Medici answered. Dr. Lytton examined the torn envelope.

"Rollo, Maine," he repeated; "mailed yesterday morning. Come now, pull yourself together, Julien."

"Yes."

"The thing is complete. It fits in. Hm, what a curious handwriting. You recognize it?"

"Hers," he answered.

“Almost,” the scientist murmured. “Come, the mystery draws to an end. I would like to make comparisons. Have you a letter of hers?”

“Yes.”

Mechanically, De Medici opened the table drawer. Dr. Lytton brought a candle close to its contents.

“Here!” he exclaimed. His eyes studied the envelope. “Written two months ago. Fine. Excellent.”

He removed a letter sheet and spread it under the light. De Medici watched him. His calm had returned.

“Floria and not Francesca,” he mused. “Floria of the dagger. Then the hallucination was not entirely unreal. He said something . . . what was it? A similar image in his brain.”

His heart sickened as the realization grew. Guilty! Yet a few moments ago a conviction had overpowered him—a certainty that he was toying with chimeras, that no truth or substance lay in his evil obsessions. But now the letter . . . and the postmark. . . .

“A similarity,” Dr. Lytton finally announced. “The letter from Rollo, Maine, could have been written by the same hand that wrote this letter to you. Yet they are not identical. There are several vital differences, although a layman, on cursory examination, would call them of no conse-

quence. Yes, the difference is a difference of tempo. Floria, the lady of the dagger, writes with a certain jerky stiffness. The characters show high nervous tension, excitement, hysteria. An exaggeration of her natural chirography. Look, the lines are uneven. The letters jumble in spots. The thing resembles the slow, painful scrawl of a child. Yet it was written in fierce haste. . . . Hysteria."

De Medici nodded. His eyes avoided the thing under the doctor's hands.

"I perceived it from the beginning," the scientist continued. "Everything pointed to it. A dual personality. . . ."

"Florence and Floria," murmured De Medici.

Dr. Lytton's manner had become elate. A professional singsong was in his voice. He was off on a favorite topic once more. His heavy face glistened with enthusiasm. The underworlds of the soul . . . the absorbing novelties of manias . . . these were his scientific specialties.

"I expected one of two things out of my visit," he announced. "I knew what sort of creature had killed Ballau. . . . It had left its marks in every detail. An amazing murder. . . . A slow, painful, and yet fiercely executed crime. Like the handwriting on this letter paper. The eerie footprints of hysteria. They were all over the deed. A soul writhing in the depths of a crazed sleep."

“He is quoting from his paper on somnambulism,” mused De Medici. His eyes remained on the doctor’s face. Lytton had settled back in his chair. His wrathful and nervous manner had given way to a pedagogic air. Yet as he talked his eyes peered through the lowered lashes at the immobile figure of De Medici.

“The dual personality was obvious, Julien. But, ah, whose? And the obvious answer was—yours. The dagger—a relic of De Medici evil. The blood-stained hands. I learned this from Norton. Florence’s confusion. Her concealed evidence. To protect you, of course. I talked to her after you had taken her to the theater. You remember, the inquest morning?”

“What did she say?” De Medici whispered.

“Mad. You were mad. But I needed no diagnosis from her. Mad you seemed. And very clever, too clever at the inquest. A curious balance of sincerity and evasion. And the two hours between eight o’clock and ten o’clock that night he was killed. Where had you spent them? Yes, a walk in Broadway. But you never walk, my dear Julien. Do I remember correctly? The purse gave me my first definite conviction, however.”

“And now your theory is?” De Medici prompted him quietly.

“The letter has ended it,” Dr. Lytton replied. “Florence Ballau and not Julien De Medici.”

"But I may have written it myself," De Medici murmured; "written it, sent it from Rollo, Maine . . . to myself . . . evidence to exonerate me."

"I thought of that," smiled Dr. Lytton. "Except that you couldn't have known I would be here tonight. The letter is authentic. And the rest unravels itself."

He beamed at the masked eyes of his host.

"Dual personality, as we know it," he continued, "is a dramatic disease. Yes, the phenomenon of disassociation. . . . People are seldom born with dual personalities except in the most neurotic of cases. Ordinarily they acquire them. In pathology, dual personality cases belong to the ill-defined border-land between sanity and insanity. It is for that reason that I have been inclined to ridicule your own obsessions, Julien. Dual personalities are not inherited. Bad blood may breed disorders. But the charming Jekyll and Hyde pose you have been trying to wish on yourself is, scientifically, absurd. Are you interested, Julien?"

"Yes."

The two men sat facing each other out of the shadows of the velvet-hung room. The candles burned motionlessly.

"I remember a case of a woman named Jenny," Dr. Lytton mused aloud. "Do you mind sitting closer so I can see you, Julien? It's rather diffi-

cult talking to an apparition. Thanks. . . . Now we'll discuss the strange case of Florence Ballau. I'll give you the groundwork. We'll be able to operate in the open, then. And I shall need your help. Yes, you can help me, Julien."

"Go on," De Medici muttered.

"About Jenny," Dr. Lytton resumed. "Well, she was the mother of a three-year-old boy who, while playing, slipped out of the window of their flat. As she came walking back from the grocery store, Jenny looked up. She saw her child hanging by his fingers from the window four stories above the ground. She stood powerless and transfixed while his little fingers slowly gave way. She watched him slip . . . slip, and then his body shot to the ground and was smashed to a pulp before her eyes. And here we have a logical cause for dual personality.

"The shock was terrific for the mother. It split her mind. And an abnormal condition developed. Her little son fell to his death eight years ago and Jenny is now in an asylum. I've studied her carefully. She is the ideal dual personality case. You see, Julien, nothing inherited, no phantoms, no mysterious impulses. Merely a shock that split the mind into two compartments. She presents the following symptoms. She will be engaged, for instance, in sewing or in conversation. Suddenly she ceases her work. She stands up. Her eyes

lift. And for the minutes that follow she lives over again the awful scene of her little son's death, carrying out in every detail the tragedy of the thing. And during the minutes the hallucination endures she goes through the scene with all the power of an accomplished emotional actress.

"Yes, I've watched her. While this drama is in progress she is perfectly unconscious of the actual things happening around her. She hears nothing that is said and sees nothing but the imaginary scene which she is reliving. This phenomenon, which is technically called somnambulism, will end as suddenly as it begins, and Jenny will return to her former occupation, absolutely unaware of the fact that it has been interrupted. You see how different your alleged and artificial case of fancied obsession is, Julien. You remember too much. The vision of Francesca is in your mind now—the thing you fancied you saw. Therefore you are not a victim of disassociation. If you're a man of evil at all, it is you who sit here and not a hidden, unknown you that walks in the dark places of your subconscious."

Dr. Lytton leaned forward and placed his hand on De Medici's knee.

"If Jenny is questioned during her apparently normal intervals," he said, "it will be found that she has not only entirely forgotten everything

that happened during her somnambulism, but that the whole tragedy of her boy's death has completely disappeared from her conscious mind. She remembers nothing of the minutes she stood watching her son slipping from the window ledge. And if you press her she'll discuss his death vaguely and indifferently as if it were the death of someone else's child. She'll say, 'Oh, he just died, that's all.' And reveal no interest or emotion whatsoever. Yet concerning all other things of her past life she has a rather keen memory.

"This curious localized loss of memory or amnesia is found in some cases. In other dual personality cases we have a complete loss of memory of all events preceding the shock that produced the disassociation. So you see, science absolves you, Julien."

De Medici nodded.

"Now we come to Florence Ballau. A high-strung, vivid temperament," continued Dr. Lytton. "The letter signed Floria and decorated with the dagger reveals one thing. Its writer is suffering from delusions of persecution. Persecutory delusions are a common form of mental disorder. We all have them more or less. Floria is the terrified and persecuted thing that dwells in the soul of Florence Ballau. At times this terrified thing usurps the body of Miss Ballau and lives its own mysterious life. As in the case of

Jenny it is not an inherited phenomenon. It was induced by shock of some sort. Florence may be dimly aware of the change after she returns to herself. More likely, however, she is merely distracted, depressed, and suffers from a sense of bewilderment."

De Medici nodded again.

"I remember something," he said slowly.

"I thought you would," smiled Dr. Lytton.

"I had called at her apartment unexpectedly. It was last year. I rang the bell a half dozen times before anyone answered. Finally the door was opened by Florence. I hardly recognized her. She stood before me white-faced and eyes staring. I had a feeling for the moment that something terrible had happened, was happening. I tried to pass it over—such things always confuse me violently—by inviting myself in for a cup of tea. She stood looking at me almost as if she failed to recognize me. Then she said, 'Father isn't home,' and closed the door in my face."

"Excellent," murmured the doctor. "The perfect corroboration. And did you ever ask her what had been wrong?"

"She called me up," De Medici answered, "the next morning, and apologized for the incident. She said she suffered from periodic headaches the pain of which almost drove her beside herself. I had come on her during one of the spells."

"Did she use the word 'spells'?" Dr. Lytton asked.

"I think she did," De Medici answered.

The two men became silent. The candles had burned down. One of them sputtered excitedly for a moment and then faded out. De Medici's eyes watched the growing flicker of the three lights. Darkness would come. . . . His heart chilled. Florence, crazed and standing dagger in hand before her father. . . . Victor Ballau staring aghast at the horrible-eyed woman who wore the body of his daughter but in whose soul leaped the awful desires of a demoniacal stranger . . . the lady of the dagger.

"Nothing is explained," he mused as the second candle drifted away. The darkness stepped closer to the two men. "The beard . . . the thing he clutched. . . ."

"I follow your thoughts," murmured Dr. Lytton from behind his hand. "The false Vandyke. . . ."

"Yes," De Medici said. The two remaining candles were dying. A terror swept him. Darkness . . . it would grow black. There were candles in the table drawer. His hands crept slowly forward and stopped. An inanition held them. He sat riveted, unable to stir. Terror exploded a Roman candle in his head. . . .

"Ah," he breathed, a sweat covering him.

Darkness! A black room. His throat framed a cry. . . . "Ah," he moaned.

Hands were pressing him down, holding him against the chair. Something was at his throat. No, inside his throat, crawling into his mouth. Suddenly his arms flung themselves against the air. He plunged to his feet, beating at the blackness.

"Lights . . . lights!" came in a scream from his throat. The doctor's voice roared a command.

"Stand still!"

The figure of De Medici spun crazily in the darkness and crashed into the velvet-covered wall. It sank without sound to the floor. The doctor groped toward the table.

"Julien!" he cried. His thick fingers were fumbling with a match box. He held a quickly lighted candle aloft. The curtained room swayed and danced in the shadows. . . . A figure lay, face down, arms outstretched and fingers spread against the gigantic-seeming drape.

The telephone was ringing. Its bell tinkled eerily in the dark. Dr. Lytton stood listening. A voice was waiting for him. He stepped forward and lifted the receiver from its hook.

"Is this Mr. De Medici?" a voice asked.

"Yes," the doctor answered.

"This is Lieutenant Norton on the wire, Mr.



De Medici. Can you come over to my office at once?"

"What is it?"

"I haven't time to go into any detail over the phone," the voice answered. "But I would like to see you as soon as possible. We've found the murderer of Mr. Ballau."

CHAPTER VIII

DENOUEMENT NO. I

In which Nemesis babbles cheerfully—In which the Dead Flower adopts new petals—Postmarks and time-tables and a false beard that sneers mischievously—Also a scrawl of vengeance, enigmatic ashes and a half signature.

THE cab rolled through the dark streets. Dr. Lytton's hand rested on the knee of his companion.

"All right now?" he asked.

De Medici nodded.

"Dizziness," he answered laconically.

"A rather interesting case," the doctor looked at him speculatively. "Fear, eh? Morbid and illogical fear. Hm. Nothing simpler. Phobias are easy to trace. You fainted. Fainting is an escape from overwhelming impulses that are repugnant to the conscious mind. You had an impulse. . . ."

De Medici smiled.

"He prowls around like a blind weasel," he mused as the scientist talked.

"Yes. Obvious. Why not discuss it?" Dr. Lytton was saying. "Such things must be con-

sidered impersonally. Your impulse was to murder me, Julien. Darkness, candles, long velvet curtains—these things fascinate you because they are symbols of desires that hide in you.”

De Medici shrugged his shoulders.

“Here we are,” he spoke as the cab stopped before a lighted building.

They entered the police station arm in arm. De Medici’s legs still felt weak. A man in police uniform conducted them to Lieutenant Norton’s office. The lieutenant rose to greet them. De Medici noted the look of triumph which kindled his eyes.

“Well, come right in,” cried the detective exuberantly. “Glad to see you, Mr. De Medici.”

He nodded somewhat less enthusiastically at the stocky figure of Dr. Lytton.

“How d’you do, doctor?” he added.

De Medici sat down beside the lieutenant’s desk.

“So you’ve found the murderer?” he asked quietly. “In which case you must have changed your mind about Mr. Ballau’s suicide.”

“Sit down, sit down, doctor,” Norton beamed, “and I’ll apologize for a lot of things. Have a cigar?”

The visitors declined. Dr. Lytton, regarding the red-faced detective, mused silently.

“He’s stumbled on something. An intelligent man, but clumsy and superficial,” he was thinking.

Norton seemed to expand in his chair. His face glowed with delight as he began to talk.

“Well, gentlemen,” he said, “I owe you my first apology for pretending to you I thought Victor Ballau had killed himself. I was absolutely convinced it was a murder on the night we found the body. I had the impression of suicide for a few minutes. But before ten minutes had passed investigation showed me that there were a number of things not to be explained by the suicide theory. Well, gentlemen, realizing that the murder was an intricate one and that it would take a great deal of care to unravel the mystery, I adopted the suicide theory as a ruse and instructed my force to take a similar attitude. We harped on this theory at the inquest. You see, it was my purpose to throw the criminal off the track and make the capture a bit easier.”

“Marvelous,” murmured De Medici. The lieutenant’s naïveté had suddenly amused him. “A bewildering deception. And you got him.”

Norton grinned at the man’s banter.

“Her,” he corrected. “Miss Florence Ballau.”

Dr. Lytton nodded.

“Where is she?” he inquired.

“Under lock and key,” said Norton. “We arrested her yesterday morning.”

“Where?” whispered De Medici.

“In New York,” Norton answered.

De Medici's eyes closed happily. In New York yesterday morning . . . and the letter from Rollo, Maine, had been mailed yesterday morning. . . . Two conflicting incidents. He laughed softly.

"And you think Miss Ballau committed the murder?" he repeated. "The theory is as bewildering, if not as charming, as your first, lieutenant."

Norton nodded in good humor and lighted a cigar. Dr. Lytton sat regarding De Medici.

"Mailed yesterday from Rollo, Maine," the scientist mused, "and she was arrested yesterday in New York. Then she either left the thing with a friend to mail for her, or"

His eyes gleamed for an instant and an excited smile curved his heavy lips.

"The case turned out much simpler than we actually expected," continued Norton. "We got our first clew within a few hours after the murder. We found out Miss Ballau had received a telephone call at the theater at 9:30 on the night of the crime. The stage manager had called her to the phone. He stood within hearing distance while she talked. He heard her say something like, 'Yes . . . yes. Oh, God!' And he noticed she was upset when she hung up. She told him she felt sick. He tried to argue with her but she dashed out of the theater without changing her costume or taking the paint off her face."

"A revelation," murmured De Medici. His spirits seemed to have risen as the detective talked. Dr. Lytton sat with his lips pursed, dividing his attention between the two men.

"I knew you knew about the telephone call," Norton went on good-naturedly, "and I don't blame you for trying to shield the girl."

"Gallant," sighed De Medici. "Thanks. Go on."

"Well," resumed Norton, "we finally located the cabby who had driven her home. This took a few hours, but when we got him he remembered her well, owing to the fact she had her make-up and costume on and acted queer and excited. She got into his cab outside the theater and drove to the Ballau apartment, giving him a dollar tip in advance and telling him to go as fast as he could. Her contention at the inquest was that she reached the apartment about half-past ten. From the stage manager's evidence and the cabby's statement it is obvious that she got home about a quarter to ten the latest. If she'd stopped at all between the telephone call and entering the cab she'd have removed her make-up and taken her hat or a wrap of some kind. We know she didn't. Our investigations in the Ballau home resulted in finding a towel in the linen basket off Miss Ballau's room. The towel was smeared with rouge and lampblack. We found out that the basket

had been emptied that afternoon by the laundryman. Therefore the towel with the rouge and lampblack on it was placed there during that day."

"Your deductions are invulnerable," De Medici smiled.

"We'll discuss them more fully later," Norton countered, his good humor remaining under the derision of his visitor. "You don't seem convinced that Miss Ballau is guilty?" He smiled in turn.

De Medici shook his head.

"Despite his good humor," he thought, "he's uncertain of something. The theory has a hole in it. . . . Or he wouldn't be telling me. Or perhaps it's another one of his brilliant ruses. . . ."

"We'll discuss them more fully later," Norton continued. "I'm going to the trouble of outlining the case to you because I think you can help me on several points. For instance, this."

The detective opened a cupboard at the side of his desk and removed a bundle. Unwrapping it, a woman's gown was revealed.

"Have you ever seen this before?" Norton asked.

De Medici regarded the gown without moving. . . . A costume, nineteenth century . . . Italian, flashed through his mind. Her costume in "The Dead Flower"! No. . . .

"I see you recognize it," Norton said. "Miss Ballau's dress in your show, eh?"

De Medici picked up the thing and spread it out. No, not hers. He smiled inwardly. The certainty had come to him that the detective had bungled.

"Never mind," Norton continued. "I don't want to trap any evidence from you. We found this dress on the fire escape outside the window of the Ballau library. This dress and"—he stopped, opened a drawer in his desk—"and this crucifix. Do you recognize it?"

"Yes," murmured De Medici involuntarily. It was the gift he had made Florence to wear with the "Dead Flower" costume—an oddly designed cross of ebony backed with silver.

"Thanks," Norton smiled. "The dress and the cross were together. But to go on. There are a number of vital points. For instance, Miss Ballau testified that Jane, the housekeeper, let her in that night. We've questioned the housekeeper secretly. She's a simple-minded woman. After some grilling we discovered that she did not let Miss Ballau into the apartment and that the first she knew of that young lady's presence in the house was the sound of her screaming. And this screaming, you will bear in mind, came fully thirty to thirty-five minutes after Miss Ballau arrived home. On pressing Jane further, we dis-

covered that Miss Ballau had pleaded with her as a vital personal favor on which her life depended, to say that she had let her in at the time and in the manner they both swore to at the coroner's inquest."

Dr. Lytton cleared his throat.

"You have police witnesses to the house-keeper's confession?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, and several witnesses not of the police," Norton answered. "Meyerson was present, and a man named Carvello. But let me go on. We found the key to the apartment in Miss Ballau's purse the night of the murder. I looked for it myself and, on finding it, left it there. Miss Ballau, you will remember, testified she had lost the key some weeks before. Which explained why she had to ring the bell to get in."

"These things are hardly sufficient for the arrest of Miss Ballau," De Medici said quietly as the detective paused.

"I quite agree," said Norton. "All this was evidence we had within two days of the murder. We didn't act on it but continued our hunt for more. More was necessary and we waited till we got it."

De Medici nodded.

"The motive, for instance," smiled Norton. "Well, three days after the inquest, or two days, I think, Miss Ballau disappeared. We had been

watching her closely but she managed to elude us. I put two of my best men in pursuit of her and I devoted my own time to finding out her history. I was able to discover through documents and inquiry that Florence Ballau was not Victor Ballau's daughter but his stepdaughter. She was a year old when Ballau married her mother in London. As you see, this supplies the beginnings of a motive."

Through De Medici's mind passed a suddenly illuminated memory of Victor Ballau—the Ballau whose fingers had trembled as he poured the liqueur that night, whose eyes had turned away as he toasted the happiness of his prospective son-in-law. His heart grew heavy as the innuendo of the lieutenant unfolded its logical terminations before him.

"We would like to have your theory of the motive," Dr. Lytton prompted the smiling detective. "Motives, of course, are always more interesting and more important than clews."

"You were to be married," Norton resumed, turning to De Medici. "And Ballau was jealous."

"I see," murmured De Medici. He sat staring at the man. Words suddenly danced excitedly in his head. "The thing is mad," he cried. "You've let a preposterous notion run away with you. . . ."

Dr. Lytton's arm reached toward his friend.

“We’ve come here to listen, not to argue,” he cautioned.

“Pardon me,” De Medici sighed. His face resumed its mask of calm and interest.

“Certainly,” Norton answered. “I’m sorry to go into this. But there’s nothing to be gained now by not facing the facts.”

“Quite right,” Dr. Lytton smiled. “The facts are what we want.”

“The facts are that Mr. Ballau more than anyone else desired the match,” De Medici spoke.

“Or seemed to,” Norton interrupted. “But on the night that the engagement was to have been announced he quite changed his mind about the desirability of the match. And he played his trump card with the girl. It was Ballau who telephoned her at the theater at half-past nine. This was a very easy fact to establish. The telephone girl of the Hudson Apartments remembered distinctly, and we have no reason to doubt her word, that Mr. Ballau asked her to get his daughter on the phone at the Galt Theater. Her memorandum pad of outgoing calls contains the notation, ‘Ballau—Columbus 2600. 9:28.’ ”

“Are you certain,” Dr. Lytton interrupted, “that the notation refers to an outgoing call? It may have been Miss Ballau who telephoned her father.”

“No,” Norton shook his head. “There are

three items of evidence bearing on the point. One is the testimony of the telephone girl. Another is the fact that Cort, the stage manager, summoned Miss Ballau to the phone, and the third is the memorandum pad itself. The call appears listed in the column marked 'Outgoing.' "

Norton leaned back in his chair, his face grown serious and aloof.

"We come now to the hour of the murder," he resumed. "Ballau telephoned his stepdaughter. It was his last known act before his death. And the answer to our mystery lies in the answer to the question, 'What did Victor Ballau say to his stepdaughter at half-past nine on the night of April 10th?'" "

The detective's dramatic utterance irritated De Medici. He sat frowning and following in silence the man's theory.

"Well," Norton was saying, "you'll remember that a week or so before his death Ballau had made a new will leaving all his money to the girl. Why? Because he loved her. He had loved her for a long time. The will was made in her presence. It was a plea for her. But it failed. There's no question but that he fought with her continually on this subject—his love for her. Yes, and her past love for him. He pleaded and threatened in turn. He was an old man and old men are sometimes given to strange passions.

“Finally, when there was nothing else left, when the time had come to surrender her publicly to you, he lost his head. He called her up. Get this man Ballau, now, gentlemen, upset by his infatuation for the girl, preparing for the hour when he must surrender all hope of her, mixed up, crazy. And he telephones her. He can’t stand it any longer. He tells her over the phone that he must see her. She answers evasively, ‘Yes . . . yes.’ And he goes on pleading. And finally he plays his trump card. He tells her unless she renounces De Medici he’ll expose the relations that have existed between them—between Ballau and his supposed daughter. Relations, let us say, before you entered her life, Mr. De Medici.

“Well, he was going to do this thing publicly. It was a cowardly act. But, mind you, the sort of threat a man of his age driven to despair by his infatuation would make. And she rushed home. There were yet two hours to ward off the thing he threatened. She rushed home, beside herself, to appeal to his better side, to plead with him and weep and entreat him. The disgrace he had threatened her with on the eve of her engagement party was enough to make any young woman go wild. You can imagine what followed as easily as I can,” he concluded, “her pleading, his excitement, her tears, his offers, and, disgrace staring her in the face, her hysteria and the murder.”

Dr. Lytton regarded De Medici.

“What do you think of it?” he asked.

De Medici’s head was lowered. His narrow eyes, half closed, were contemplating the floor.

“Nothing,” he answered softly. “A persuasive cock and bull story.”

Norton grew irritable.

“I called you here to see if you would assist me,” he said. “I want to know how she acted the morning you proposed to her. Did she say anything about Ballau?”

“Nothing,” answered De Medici, “except that she knew he would be overjoyed.”

Norton nodded and looked grim. De Medici, studying the floor, was thinking. “She was nervous. Yes, I remember something . . . about Ballau. Her manner changed. She asked what he had said . . . two or three times. And she wept when I left her. . . . White-faced and weeping in front of the theater. . . . Preposterous! Not Florence. There’s something else. This creature paws clumsily with surfaces. . . .”

The voice of Dr. Lytton interrupted his musings.

“You haven’t finished, I hope,” the doctor smiled.

“No. A few more things,” Norton answered testily. “They may interest you. The scene of the crime, eh? The disorder and the mysterious

props? Well, the murder suddenly committed—committed during a moment of despair and passion—the young woman stood beside the body of the man she had killed and some sort of a notion of planting evidence to throw the police off the track came into her head. A notion typical of the woman who has spent her life in the theater. You'll remember she was beside herself at this moment, that whatever she did in the half hour following the slaying of Ballau would naturally be the things an innocent and imaginative woman, and not a hardened criminal, would do in an effort to cover up the crime. She began to tear things and overthrow things. She went about it bewilderedly. Her idea was to make it seem as if a terrific struggle had taken place so that suspicion would not fall on a woman but on some powerful assailant. But you saw yourself how she bungled it in her distraction. The books, curtains, pictures: the crucifix and the candle—all unconvincing. The table idiotically set as for a supper for two. All things that a distracted, imaginative and hysterical young woman with a theatrical training would do."

"Excellent," breathed Dr. Lytton. "Your psychology stands on firm ground. We might even go a step further. We might even say that a very clever murderer or murderess would have arranged that scene not to give the police false

clews for a crime, but to make it seem as if Ballau had killed himself—and arranged the entire scene to convince the police a crime had not been committed. She might have figured out something of that nature, don't you think?"

"Yes, I thought of that," Norton said slowly, "but I doubt it. She hadn't time."

"Unless," Dr. Lytton objected, "unless the murder was committed as soon as she entered the room. Or, let us say, before. . . ."

Norton looked indignantly at the scientist.

"The theory doesn't impress you despite the evidence?" he asked.

"I would be more impressed and certainly more interested," Dr. Lytton answered, "if your theories included the presence of the false beard that was found in Ballau's hand."

Lieutenant Norton nodded and opened the drawer of his desk again. He removed a large manila envelope. The humorous-looking false Vandyke, reminiscent of the slapstick methods of stage comedians, lay exposed on his desk. Dr. Lytton stepped forward.

"May I look at this?" he asked. The lieutenant nodded.

"Hm, I thought so," the doctor murmured. Taking a note-book from his pocket, he wrote down a few words. Norton raised his brows.

"With your permission, lieutenant," Dr. Lyt-

ton looked at him. "I'm merely recording the fact, which I don't think has been recorded, for it doesn't quite fit in with your ingenious theorizings, that this beard is the product of a man named Lenvier—a well-known London wig-maker. You can read his name on the label here."

The detective scowled. His amiability seemed to have finally abandoned him.

"And now," went on Dr. Lytton, "I am, for reasons entirely apart from the crime or its possible perpetrator, interested to know how you explain the presence of this beard in the dead man's hand. Also the gum mucilage which you yourself so ably discovered on his face."

"Nothing difficult about that," Norton answered. "It's a minor point. Ballau put the thing on himself before his stepdaughter arrived. He was seen wearing it by the housekeeper. But he didn't show himself for purposes of disguise. He was evidently caught with it on by her unawares. She testified, you remember, that she got only a glimpse of him. You'll recall that Ballau summoned the girl to tell her that unless of her own accord she renounced her intention of marrying De Medici, he'd expose her that night . . . to disgrace. You can easily imagine that his purpose in calling her to come to him was not merely a desire to tell her what he was going to do. He also had the hope of being able to induce

her to return to him . . . of winning her back, in other words. This man's brain is not at its clearest and his sense of the fitness of things isn't at its best at that moment. And he does something which may appeal to you gentleman as ridiculous."

"As long as it explains the beard," murmured the doctor.

"Yes," snapped Norton, "as long as it explains the beard."

He stared with indignation at the offensive-looking bit of false hair on his desk.

"Ballau put it on that night," he announced savagely, "because he imagined it made him look handsomer and younger. He'd been an actor in his youth."

De Medici stared with incredulous eyes at the man.

"What the devil!" he exclaimed. "Are you mad, lieutenant?"

As Norton's reddish face glittered wrathfully at him, De Medici suddenly laughed. . . . So this was the police theory! Quite a respectable theory of its sort, but bristling incongruously with false Vandykes. Yes, a Vandyke, a humorously homeless Vandyke knocked in vain for admittance.

"As I said," Norton added sourly, "the point is of minor importance. If you don't like that theory there's another. The false beard was

placed in the dead man's hand by Miss Ballau and the mucilage added. A part of her camouflage to put us on a wrong scent."

"Very nice," Dr. Lytton smiled, "except that, if I recall, the dead man was clutching the thing. His fingers had to be unfastened. However, we may pass over this point, as you say." The doctor chuckled.

"Just one moment, if you please," Norton cried, "before you laugh too heartily. I expect Miss Ballau's confession by morning. In the meantime you may be interested in the circumstances of her arrest."

He had grown heavily sarcastic.

"I told you that Miss Ballau eluded us," he said, "a few days after the inquest. But my men picked up her trail again two days ago. She had hidden herself in a cheap rooming-house district. We watched her closely. She remained secluded for a day without emerging once. But yesterday morning she left her rooming house. She went straight to the Ballau apartment. She was heavily veiled and escaped the doorman's attention. She went up in the elevator and let herself in with the key. Michaelson of my staff was on guard in the apartment. He'd been there since the night of the murder—waiting. He heard Miss Ballau enter and, unseen by her, watched her. He followed her down the hall and saw her enter her

bedroom. But she was almost too quick for him. Before he was able to get to her, she had lighted a candle and set fire to a letter taken from her bureau drawer."

The detective paused and, with a return of his former composure, extracted a small envelope from the manila wrapper on his desk. From the envelope he carefully removed the fragments of a piece of charred letter paper.

"Michaelson managed to save this," he added.

De Medici and the doctor arose and stared at the burned fragment. All that was visible was the last line of what evidently had been a short letter. The line read:

"So I warn you I am desperate. . . ."

Beneath the line was part of the signature. The flame had burned away all but the letters F-l-o-r. . . .

"Floria," murmured De Medici.

"Florence," announced the detective, "Florence Ballau."

Raising his voice, he added to an aide in the doorway:

"Bring Miss Ballau in here. . . ."

CHAPTER IX

THE HIDDEN VOICE

In which a scientist half opens a reluctant door—The strange sleep of Florence Ballau—The broken murmur—"It was . . . it was . . ."—In which a detective scratches his ear and sighs—In which Julien De Medici puts on his armor.

"MAY I examine this?" Dr. Lytton asked as the aide walked out of the lieutenant's office.

"Yes, of course."

Dr. Lytton and De Medici studied the bit of charred paper.

"The lady of the dagger," the doctor spoke softly. De Medici nodded, and the lieutenant concealed a growing curiosity behind an official indifference.

"Yes," continued Dr. Lytton, "the same hand that wrote 'Floria.' The script is identical." He raised his voice. "I presume," he inquired, "that you've established the fact this is Miss Ballau's handwriting, lieutenant?"

Norton nodded comfortably.

"Yes," he answered, "we've gone into that at some length. We've compared it with specimens of Miss Ballau's normal handwriting. The simi-

larity is obvious. Miss Ballau has two different handwritings. One of them a normal hand. The other—this. Our experts tell me that the writing here is indicative of a high emotional tension, almost fury, and that its resemblance to Miss Ballau's normal hand is unmistakable. Dr. Greer is of the opinion that it's the handwriting either of a drug addict or a person suffering from periodic insanity."

"Exactly," murmured Dr. Lytton. De Medici raised his eyes suddenly.

Framed in the doorway stood the pale, silent figure of Florence Ballau. De Medici sprang to his feet.

"Florence!" he cried.

She regarded him with an intent smile. He seized her hand and his eyes searched her face. An inscrutable pallor, a defiant and guarded gleam, these he observed instantly. But behind the unyielding pride of the young woman he perceived a confusion.

"Not fear, not fear," repeated itself swiftly in his thought. "Then she is innocent. It's something else. Grief, apprehension. . . ."

He murmured her name again.

"Florence, do you forgive me for the thing I said in the theater?"

Her head moved imperceptibly.

"Yes."

The dulled voice echoed miserably in his ears. Pity and love overcame his tongue. He continued to look at her in silence.

"Suffering . . . suffering," whispered itself in his thought. He noted that she had turned her eyes to the detective. A bustling little matron in white stood behind her.

"Good evening, Miss Ballau," Norton addressed her. "Will you sit down, please?"

She lowered herself into a chair, her gestures preoccupied as if her wits were sleeping. Dr. Lytton had neither moved nor spoken. He sat now facing her, his eyes gleaming with a curious avidity.

"I have told Mr. De Medici," began Norton. "He knows our whole story."

"Yes," De Medici smiled at her, "a charming and impossible tale."

"Then you have changed your mind, Julien?" she murmured.

"Yes," he answered, "I have, as they say in the melodramas, unshaken faith in your innocence."

Again he took her hand and his voice grew deep with assurance.

"For a reason, Florence," he said softly, "for a perfect and impregnable reason. Because——"

He paused, aware of Dr. Lytton's restraining

frown. He had been about to speak of the letter from Rollo.

"Tell me as much or as little as you wish," he added. "Lieutenant Norton's theories. . . ." He shrugged his shoulders and smiled politely toward the detective. "Preposterous," he finished.

Florence looked at him, her eyes dulled. She seemed to hear vaguely what he said. Fatigue and anguish appeared to have reduced her to a condition of semiconsciousness. Yet, behind the ivory mask of her face, her emotions were tearing at her senses. Her fingers moved spasmodically in her lap, her lips twitched, and the taut posture of her shoulders seemed to hold a hidden scream. Dr. Lytton leaned slowly forward and took her hand.

"I would like to talk to you," he said in a low voice.

She moved her hand tiredly over her eyes.

"What do you want?"

"Look at me," the pathologist demanded quietly. "And sleep."

De Medici frowned. Hypnosis! The doctor was placing her under a sleep. His gleaming eyes were fastened unwaveringly on the face of the weary, anguish-ridden girl.

Norton raised his hand to object.

"A confession will be easy . . . if there is one to be gotten," Dr. Lytton anticipated him. Low-

ering his voice, he repeated the word, "sleep . . . sleep. . . ."

The figure of Florence Ballau underwent a curious change. The tension of her body slowly relaxed. Her eyes that had veiled the wildness of her thought grew large, calm and centered.

"Asleep," murmured Dr. Lytton. The three men sat looking at her with amazement.

"She's in a hypnotic state," continued the doctor. "It was easy to put her to sleep. Her consciousness was already almost spent and exhausted with the struggle in her. And now," he continued, facing the detective, "we can put the dual personality theory to a test. Not an infallible one. But a convincing one. It is almost impossible to obtain admissions from a hypnotized subject concerning crimes or sins openly committed. Because the mind which conceived and enjoyed these crimes and sins is usually the conscious mind. And it is this conscious mind which now sleeps in Miss Ballau.

"But," he went on, still staring at her, "if the crime is committed by a usurper, if murder is done by the masked stranger, the subconscious mind, then it is sometimes simple. I'll talk to her now. Not to Florence Ballau but to the other thing—the other personality, if there is one, that lives in the underworld of her soul. Miss Ballau

is asleep. A door opens inside her and a furtive stranger steps out."

His hand rested on her shoulder. He had risen and was leaning over her.

"Do you know who you are?" he asked softly.

The rigid lips of the subject parted and moved as if operated by marionette strings.

"Yes."

"Who? Tell us your name. . . ."

There was a pause.

"Your name?" repeated Dr. Lytton tensely. "She hesitates," he whispered. "You see. There's another name to come. . . . She hesitates. . . . A wary creature, this thing. . . ."

The girl's face swayed against the back of the chair. A moaning sound came from her.

"Acting," mused De Medici slowly as his eyes watched her. "She pretends. She is awake, alive. She hesitates, uncertain what to do, what course to follow. Why? Ah, something to confess."

His thought grew confused. She was acting, pretending a hypnoidal state and talking shrewdly, falling into the monotone familiar to the stage as denoting "trance condition." De Medici felt convinced of this. Her monotone had betrayed her. At least, as her first words came he recalled instantly that this was the voice she had used in the part she had played a year ago.

"But I may be wrong," he thought swiftly. "If it was real, if she were actually under hypnosis, her subconscious would utilize an easy voice—a voice without inflections or nuances and easy for its unaccustomed energies to operate. . . ."

"Can't you think of your name?" pressed Dr. Lytton. Her lips began again to move.

"Flor . . . Flor . . . " they pronounced. . . .
"Florence Ballau."

"A censorship operates," murmured the pathologist. "The conscious mind lies on the threshold of this door and prevents it from opening. But she hesitated. A significant fact."

His eyes held the wide, centered eyes of his subject.

"Do you remember the night your stepfather was killed?" he asked.

The lips parted and answered slowly, "Yes."

"Will you tell the truth?" Dr. Lytton whispered.

"The truth," repeated itself from her lips.

"Do you remember the murder of your stepfather?"

She shuddered. Her eyes moved as if they were struggling. Her hands quivered in her lap. But her lips remained firm.

"The truth," Dr. Lytton whispered close to her. "Tell me the truth. There is nothing to fear."

I'm your friend. I demand that you tell me what happened. Did you kill Victor Ballau?"

"No," the lips moaned. "I came . . . I came in. . . ."

The girl swayed in the chair and the sentence remained unfinished.

"Go on," Dr. Lytton spoke gently. He paused. She continued silent. "Listen, then," he said, "tell me, then, who is Floria? Come, I insist on it. Who is Floria?"

The girl's body shuddered. Her lips moved but made no sound.

"Acting," De Medici whispered miserably to himself. "She wants to tell us something but can't think clearly what. . . . No, not that. She does just what she wishes. She confuses us, leaves us up in the air more than before. . . ." He caught a glimpse of Norton's intent and reddish face.

"Who is Floria?" repeated Dr. Lytton.

Florence stared at him with her pupil-centered eyes.

"Floria," she murmured. There was a pause. Suddenly a scream rose from her lips. She tumbled forward in her chair. De Medici sprang to her side and saved her from falling to the floor.

"She wakened," Dr. Lytton explained, mopping his heavy face. "And she's unconscious now."

He summoned the startled-looking matron and

ordered her to bring water and ammonia. Norton assisted them in reviving her.

"Please let me go back to the cell," she murmured as her eyes opened. "I feel so tired. . . ."

Norton shrugged his shoulders.

"We can gain nothing by talking to her," Dr. Lytton agreed. "She's on the verge of a collapse."

The matron helped her to rise. De Medici stood beside her. He looked calmly at her eyes until they turned from him. Her confusion and anguish brought a deep pain to his own heart. But a conviction masked his emotions.

"She knows," he murmured silently, "she knows and keeps silent. For a reason. . . ."

He smiled almost happily at her as the matron led her away.

"Who is this Floria?" Lieutenant Norton was demanding.

De Medici turned to him.

"Ah, my dear lieutenant," he answered, his voice strangely light, "a marvelous person. A suave Messalina. . . . You will find her some day. With our assistance."

He bowed and his hand gracefully indicated the doctor.

"I've found just who I want," Norton grunted. His keen eyes gleamed with irritation. "Miss

Ballau has been booked for the murder of her stepfather."

De Medici's eyes showed no emotion.

"Good night," he answered.

Dr. Lytton followed him out of the building. The pathologist's face wore an air of violently suppressed excitement.

CHAPTER X

THE DAGGER OF MIST

In which a pathologist reasons himself into a railroad trip—Francesca of the spiral eyes—The ancient science of demonology—The visiting shadow—The dagger that glistened against the moon.

NIGHT covered the streets. De Medici's expressionless face nodded an attentive punctuation to the talk of the pathologist as they left the police station behind.

"Two and two," Dr. Lytton was saying exuberantly. "The thing evolves into an ABC of logic. Poor child, poor child. You guessed it, too, eh, Julien? Well, it was easy. Anybody but a policeman would have seen it. But what acting! What consummate acting! The voice, the centered eyes, the collapse! A wonderful woman, Julien."

"Why did she do it?" De Medici asked.

"Why? Hm—to beat us at our own game," Dr. Lytton laughed. "To confuse us, bewilder us, give us no trail at all where there had been the beginning of a trail. Her hesitation over the name Floria. Her inward struggle. Ha, what a complicated fool she must take me for! But, thank God, it happened. For the thing now suddenly

comes into the domain of logic. Yes, we've done everything but think. Simplicity is always the soul of mystery. For instance, it was obvious to me five minutes after Miss Ballau entered the room that she was as normal and straightforward a nature as any I have ever seen. There is not a hint of the neurotic about her. Healthy, keen, vivacious and an actress. Good Lord, what an actress! The mock trance she went into was superb."

"You're convinced it was pretense?" De Medici asked.

"Absolutely," Dr. Lytton answered. "And now we'll begin with the first letters of the alphabet. Simplicity, dear Julien. Elementals that we've overlooked. First and finally, Florence Ballau and Floria are not one and the same. The handwriting . . . bosh! The similarity is too strained. The Floria notes were not written by Florence Ballau. Yes, I stake my life on it, Floria and Florence are two different persons."

"Ah," murmured De Medici.

"You may sneer," Dr. Lytton cried, "but wait. We'll drop in at your rooms for a while. I've almost made up my mind to something."

They walked in silence to De Medici's home. Once more the two men seated themselves in the room of the wine-colored velvets. De Medici had inserted fresh candles in the holders.

“Now we can discuss our little lesson,” Dr. Lytton smiled. “You may interrupt anywhere and any time you wish, Julien. First we have this fact. Let’s look at it. The arrest of Miss Ballau in New York City yesterday morning established the probability that Miss Ballau was not in Rollo, Maine, yesterday morning. This makes it evident that Florence Ballau didn’t mail you the theatrical little note you received a few hours ago from Rollo, Maine. There’s the stupid theory she might have left it for someone else to mail after she’d come on to New York. Bosh! Involving a confederate, which is one thing against it. But . . . let us remain simple and look at things easily. Florence Ballau goes to Rollo, Maine. And after twenty-four hours she returns to New York. And after another twenty-four hours she returns to her apartment and is arrested trying to destroy a letter. A letter signed ‘Floria’ and written by the same hand that sent you your warning, Julien. Do you follow me?”

“Yes.”

“It becomes obvious at once,” continued Dr. Lytton, “that Floria is not a myth. Miss Ballau risks detection to destroy notes this Floria has written. Why does she do this? Ah, how easily the answer comes. To protect this Floria. Yes, it’s been obvious from the first that Miss Ballau knows a great deal either about the murder itself or the incidents surrounding it.

"To be brief, Julien, the girl knows who killed her stepfather and, knowing it, she is going to all lengths to hide the facts from the police. She will even allow herself to be suspected of the crime and the motives, which must nauseate her, in order to have the murder fastened on her . . . for the time."

"Yes," whispered De Medici softly. His hands moved restlessly in his lap.

"So what do we discover?" exclaimed the doctor. "Merely a very simple thing. Miss Ballau is sacrificing her liberty and reputation to protect someone. And, mind you, this someone murdered a man of whom she was very fond and to whom she owed her success in life."

"You have . . . a conclusion?" De Medici asked softly.

"Not a conclusion," Dr. Lytton laughed. "An inevitability. Whom does she protect? Her mother. The thing answers itself. Her mother, of course. Miss Ballau is trying to save her mother from being arrested for the murder of Victor Ballau. And Miss Ballau's mother is the Floria who baffles us. And I think if we caught a train tonight we would find this Floria hidden away somewhere in Rollo, Maine."

"Will you go?" De Medici asked gently.

"And you?"

Dr. Lytton fixed his excited eyes on his friend.

“I would rather stay near Florence,” he answered.

“Very well.” Dr. Lytton stood up. “Of course the unexpected may upset us. One must always keep one’s mind open to the unexpected and study it and resolve it automatically into the expected. But at this moment I am convinced that Rollo, Maine, is the end of our search.”

De Medici appeared to galvanize into sudden activity.

“Excellent, Hugo,” he cried. “I’ll telephone. there must be a train leaving before morning. It’s only eleven.”

He busied himself raising the railroad information clerk on the wire.

“She leaves at eleven thirty,” De Medici cried, hanging up. “Just enough time for you to take it. Gets in to Rollo or somewhere near Rollo at daybreak.”

“Thanks.” Dr. Lytton looked at him. “I’ll take it. And you’ll probably hear by telegraph from me before noon.”

The two men shook hands.

“Calm, now,” Dr. Lytton smiled.

De Medici was bustling him out of the room. “Good-by,” he called, “and good luck.”

“Thanks,” said the doctor. For a moment he hesitated, his eyes questioningly on the elongated face of his host. Then with a shrug of his shoul-

ders the pathologist walked away in the direction of the Grand Central station.

De Medici returned to his room—the room of shadows and pointed candle flames where a few hours before the intolerable vision had sent him sprawling in horror at the curtain edge. Sighing, he seated himself in the chair. Thank God, the prying, restless eyes of his friend were gone. He was alone. He could breathe, think, allow telltale expressions to play over his face. All without fear . . . of what? De Medici shook his head. His finger nails scratched at the side of his chair. In response to this curious summons, the curtains over the door stirred. A new shadow swayed across the floor.

The lithe, black body of a cat approached the scratching with stiff-legged caution. De Medici watched the animal pause in the center of the room, its back languidly arched under the yellow candle rays. Its eyes burned in the half dark—two tiny crosses green and phosphorescent.

“Ah,” murmured De Medici, staring at his pet, “I must be wary.” He laughed. “Fool! And what do you think, Francesca?”

His hand stretched toward the waiting cat. It approached and stood nearer his feet. Its burning eyes seemed fastened on his. He sat silent, watching the animal.

“Yes, it begins again,” he whispered. “Her

back arches. Her hair bristles. Fright, wavering terrors, move through her subtle veins. Look at her. She sees something. What? God . . . me. Her eyes become a burning mirror for the unknown. . . .”

He paused as the cat, obeying mysterious impulses, grew tense, its back bristling with inexplicable fears, its little, pointed teeth gleaming behind drawn lips. Standing thus for a moment, it recoiled suddenly from the figure of De Medici and spat.

“Ah, Francesca,” he murmured aloud, “my little mirror in which unseen ones spit back at me. He said there was nothing . . . nothing. Minor hallucinations. Yes, a reassuring diagnosis. Yet, who knows me? When I know nothing myself, who can see?”

He hesitated again and then smiled tiredly at the retreating animal.

“Not I, Francesca. No, it was another. I’ve committed no murder. The ghosts that wander inside . . . did they escape that night? No, I remember nothing . . . nothing like that. It is all dream . . . dark dream that embroiders my soul with grewsome and ghostly patterns. Guilty! Yes, I felt guilty. The detective’s eyes. And then Hugo. . . . The dark dream cringes under memories. But there was no duality. No, it was not I. Yet to others and to myself I act the part of a

murderer. I grow furtive. My words became cautious. As if . . . yes, as if I were feeling my way through guilty memories. The logic of illusion, nothing else. No demon haunts me. No masked stranger rises evilly and exultantly in my body. No, Francesca, they sleep too deep. They stir too feebly. They throw only shadows . . . shadows that mock and frighten my eyes. Hm, shadows whose dim fingers wrestle with my throat. But these shadows are not I. . . . He was right . . . ideas with which I hypnotize myself. An obsession that the past lurks unburied in me. . . . A curious curse of imagination that sent my father bellowing to his grave. But I have a brain! Do you hear, Francesca? I have a brain. It flashes out like a rapier and decapitates these demons at which you, in your enigmatic ignorance, spit, little cat. Do you see something moving behind the eyes of your master? Illusion, Francesca, it exists not.

“Foolish little cat, last of the terrified scientists for whom chimera was reality. You cling to this science of demonology. Your dark and theatrical little soul, Francesca, delights in the quackery of terror. What an immemorial fraud you are! Come closer . . . let me look into your Basque eyes. See, nothing. My reason disarms you.”

The animal turned and walked slowly from him. At the door, its head twisted back and its eyes glittered for a moment like green and enigmatic

questions. Then, with a leap that startled the shadows into motion, it vanished through the doorway.

"If not I," mused De Medici, holding his gaze to the candle flames, "then, as he says, the mystery grows simple. Neither I nor Florence. But someone whom she protects. Again a finger points at me. But would she protect me? No, not as she does. Her mother. Yes, he was right. But what sort of a woman must this be for whom she sacrifices so much? Something odd about the Ballaus. He was a strange man. Secrets lived in him. His mask was more charming than mine, more simple. Because the secret was not his own, not a part of the fiber of his ego. But a knowledge of something. I remember. It grimaced wearily behind the debonair smile. It spoke at times out of his eyes. He was tired, sad, and ridden by a fear of something. The bon vivant, the connoisseur, was a tenacious masquerade. There was suffering in him. I remember. Yes, his austere silences. His fingers escaping his will, trembling . . . and his smile that grew gentle and dull. And his virtue. His phenomenal virtue. No women in his life. Hugo wondered about that. I, too."

De Medici's thought grew dreamy and impersonal. His keen and deciphering brain played with the mystery of Ballau and his death.

"He had a wife," his thought resumed. "Yes,

and she killed him. Why? Revenge . . . an obsession for revenge. The Floria letter was mad. . . . And the note Florence tried to burn . . . mad, too. That time I found Florence looking as if she had seen the devil. . . . That had something to do with it. With her mother. Hm, bad news. Intimidating news. And Ballau called her up that night at the theater to tell her again this kind of bad news. What? Let me see. 'Yes . . . yes . . . Oh, God!' Her words on the phone. Then it was information that didn't surprise her. Or she would have asked a question, she would have said, 'when,' 'how,' 'what,' 'why.' Any question. So it was something she expected and dreaded. She wept the morning I left her after the cab ride. A secret saddened her, too. A thing she shared with him.

"I see now. He called her up to tell her the woman had appeared; to hurry home. It was the evening of our party. Disgrace. . . . And she answered, 'Yes . . . yes. . . .' She would come immediately. Therefore it was a terrible thing for her mother to appear. Why was it terrible? Obvious. Something wrong with her mother. Mania . . . the dagger signature was mania, too. So she flew home. But too late. The camouflage. . . . Florence, of course. Hiding a trail. The costume on the fire escape. . . . A foolish move. Her mother's, however. But why a costume? Hm,

thirty minutes, perhaps forty. . . . Long enough to get the woman away. And when she had done this she rushed out and screamed. . . . The dagger on the letter—yes, a maniacal creature who fancied herself persecuted, wronged by poor Ballau, her husband.”

He felt tired. The room had grown chill. Rising, he blew out three of the candles and walked with the fourth to his bedroom. Here he turned on lights. He stood before the massive, curtained bed.

“I’ll sleep,” he mused. “And tomorrow I’ll go see her. I’ll talk to her of her mother.”

It was a late April night. De Medici walked to an opened window. The panorama of city night spread below him.

“Steel beast with too many eyes,” he muttered. “It was better once. . . . Hm, in the days of my charming forebears. Cloaks, and rapiers . . . sinister-lipped smiles, wine-drenched feasts . . . brocades and marbles . . . incense and velvets . . . witches, poisons, intrigues and a laugh of youth over the world. Ah, the Renaissance . . . it lives in me still. A Bacchanal and a hymn of lust, pride, power . . . their shadows whimper inside me. . . .”

Undressed, he drew the curtains of his bed half together.

“They shut me out,” he murmured drowsily,

staring at the dark hangings. "And I can dream more easily. . . ."

. . . He had been asleep. Now his eyes opened. Terror stiffened his muscles. There was a noise. A foot was gliding over the rugs. Slowly, softly. . . . His thought dwindled. . . . "I'm awake . . . awake. . . ." He lay trembling. Someone was moving toward his bed . . . a figure outside the curtains that hid him. Murmurings, creaks, far-away noises came to his frantic ears. But above them the gentle pat of a foot growing louder.

His throat suddenly dried and the skin on his body moved. A hand was drawing aside the curtains.

"Francesca mia," whispered itself feebly through his brain. But the hand was real. Either that, or he was mad. No shadows, but a figure. . . . Or was he mad? An apparition. But this time it did not pantomime out of the darkness. It drew closer, its head billowing out the hangings. A woman! . . . He lay stiff and silent. A woman with hair hanging. Her eyes gleamed out of the dark. . . .

"Hey!" he cried. But his motion had come too late. The dark figure's hand lunged at him. He felt the steel of a knife burn in his flesh. Blood gushed across his eyes. A laugh, high-pitched and exultant, rang in his ears. He fell back and lay motionless. . . .

CHAPTER XI

ELUSIVE CLIMAXES

In which Julien De Medici finds himself grewsomely decorated—In which he passes triumphantly on his own innocence—The exonerating wound—Candlestick and cross again and the laugh of a new Francesca—A new doubt—A telegram both absurd and bewildering—Cinematographic clews.

DAWN entered the room. The spring sun lay brightly across the floor. From the street below drifted in the noise of early traffic. And De Medici opened his eyes. For a moment he stared weakly at the canopy of his bed. Then a smile turned his lips.

It was not a dream. His arm that he had thrust across his face to protect him from the knife that flashed in the moonlight lay limp and throbbing. The pillow was covered with blood. Not a dream . . . no shadows launched from the evil depths of De Medici. His smile deepened. He lay staring at the top of his bed, musing happily. . . .

“A woman with a dagger tried to kill me. . . .”

His eyes, lowering to his wounded arm, startled before a thing that lay on his chest. A black crucifix.

"Hm," he muttered. "Then there should be a candle . . . a lighted candle."

His head turned to the small table beside the bed. It was standing there. The candlestick he had brought in with him. And from its wick flickered a sun-obscured little flame. He stared intently. A paper-thin, whitened little flame. . . .

"The Ballau murder," he murmured; "candlestick and crucifix."

A feeling of panic swept him. The smile vanished. He reached and snuffed out the wick with his fingers.

"The Ballau murder," he repeated to himself, "but a bit less thorough."

The smile returned again to his white face. He raised his arm despite the pain in it. . . . A flesh wound. Terror as much as pain or physical shock had deprived him of his senses during the attack. Now he pushed himself cautiously to a sitting position and, with a strip of linen torn from the sheet, bound his arm. Behind the smile which lighted his worn-looking face he was thinking:

"Ah, what a relief! I breathe again. This wound exonerates me."

The secret dread he had carried locked in his brain since the finding of Ballau's body vanished in a laugh. He sat, his head buzzing, his eyes gleaming with happiness. He was free. The thing he had carried in him, that had gnawed sicken-

ingly at the back of his thought, was removed. He had not killed Ballau. No murderer lurked within him. He laughed again at the naïveté of his logic.

“For if it was I who murdered poor Ballau, it was not I who came into this room last night and tried to murder Julien De Medici. And since those two figures are one and the same, *selah!* I am innocent. What a sick, mad suspicion it was!”

He shuddered at the memory of the secret that had lived like a specter in his soul since the night of the tragedy. An illusionary secret! For here he lay the victim of an attack identical to the one that had ended Ballau. The candlestick, the crucifix, the dagger thrust.

Harding, the bland-faced valet, appeared in answer to his ring. He stood regarding his master in astonishment.

“Your arm, sir. . . .”

His mouth remained open and speechless as he noted the disheveled hair and pallor of De Medici.

“Yes, my arm,” De Medici smiled. “Fix it up. A cut. Get some hot water and bathe it. . . . And, by the way, Harding, did you hear anybody come in last night?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, somebody got into the room last night and tried to knife me.”

“I heard nobody,” Harding answered.

The valet busied himself excitedly dressing the

wound in his arm. De Medici sat smiling dreamily, uttering occasional instructions and issuing orders for breakfast.

“I must get up and out at once,” he explained.

“But you can’t sir, with your arm in this condition.”

“Nonsense. A little food and I’ll be whole again.”

He was impatient to reach Norton. The doddering imbecile! With his insane theories. . . . Holding her locked up, accusing her of motives and a crime despite her transparent innocence! Now that the perfect certainty of her innocence as well as his own had taken root in his thought, the knowledge of her arrest inflamed him. A simple fact pounded almost gayly through his musings. . . .

“Florence is in jail. And during her incarceration, Floria tried to murder me. The same Floria who killed Ballau. A lunatic with a mysterious murder ritual who signs her deed with a crucifix and candle. With Florence in jail and Julien De Medici in bed, there follow two delightful and inevitable conclusions. Floria is neither Florence nor De Medici. She is as innocent as I.”

Yes, Floria and Florence Ballau were two separate and distinct people. The theory Dr. Lytton had adopted stood proved. De Medici ate his breakfast with a rising appetite. He smiled

almost childishly as he thought of his friend the pathologist stumbling excitedly around the wastes of Maine in quest of this Floria.

“It’s his own fault,” he grinned. “He suggested going there.”

Dressed, with his arm bandaged, De Medici returned to his bedroom. It was nine o’clock. He would wait an hour, recuperating his strength, and then storm the Bastille and confound Norton.

“It’ll be easy now,” he thought. “Her desire to save her mother will be futile. And what harm would it do if her mother were sent to an asylum? None. Yet she stands ready to sacrifice herself for this crazed woman. Hm, altruism . . . the logic of situation dictates her sacrifice now. People become the victims of habits—even self-destructive habits. And this thing that animates Florence is one of these. . . .”

He broke off his musings and turned them on Norton. A buoyancy played under his thought.

“A clever man,” he smiled to himself, “but blinded by preconceptions and prejudices. He’ll hem and haw, stammer and grow desperate, as I reason his quarry out of his hands. . . .”

The valet entered. De Medici looked up from his food.

“A telegram for you, sir,” said Harding.

“Sign for it,” De Medici nodded.

A few minutes later the valet returned with a

yellow envelope. De Medici opened it. His lips parted in astonishment and his eyes stared confusedly as he read:

Julien De Medici,

Have found Floria. Am bringing her back on train. Arrives eleven tonight. She has confessed in full and I have cleared up entire mystery. Our first theory correct. Meet me at station. Imperative.

HUGO LYTTON,
Rollo, Maine.

De Medici studied the astounding document while his watch ticked away a full ten minutes.

"Hugo has gone mad," he finally murmured to himself. There was no other explanation. Floria captured in Rollo, Maine! A full confession! When only a few hours ago she had been in his bedroom, had struck at him with her dagger.

"Damn that imbecile," De Medici muttered. He was thinking of his friend, his bald-headed, glittering-eyed, smug-spoken friend who had gone to Rollo and left his reason in New York.

"There's only that explanation," his thought repeated, "a sudden mental collapse. Scientists have a way of collapsing. He has undoubtedly gone out of his wits."

He sat staring at his unfinished breakfast. The thing to do was to go to Norton, present his evidence in full, appeal to the detective to coöperate

and put an end to the elusive turnings of the mystery. With Lytton out of the hunt, with Lytton bombinating crazily about Florias in Rollo, Maine, the detective was a last ally.

De Medici left his rooms and walked slowly toward the police station. He felt weak and uncertain once more. A thought harassed him . . . what if Lytton wasn't mad? Yes, if the man were sane he was a formidable person to fool. But there could be no question about it. A fog settled in De Medici's head, a fog which again obscured the certainties that had elated him a few hours ago.

Cautiously he rehearsed his memories of the attack. A woman in a trailing gown had entered his bedroom around four o'clock in the morning and tried to murder him. She had left him for dead, first placing a crucifix on his chest and a lighted candle at his head. Yes, there was utterly no way in which one could avoid the conclusion . . . the inevitable conclusion that this woman was the Floria who had murdered Victor Ballau. Unless . . . he shuddered . . . unless it was not Floria who had killed Ballau but someone else. . . . Unless Floria was one who knew the slayer of Ballau and for this reason . . . Again he shuddered. The theory gave him a new headache. . . . Florence was secreting the mysterious Floria, not to save her, but to prevent her from

falling into the hands of the police and telling what she knew. . . . Then it was Florence again. . . .

De Medici entered Lieutenant Norton's office, his face once more the expressionless mask which had irritated and confused the detective at the beginning. He waited several minutes before Norton appeared.

"Good morning," De Medici greeted him. The lieutenant nodded and, his brows puckered, sat down. Turning to his visitor his eyes widened with surprise.

"Well, what's the matter with you?" he exclaimed. "You look as if you'd seen the devil. . . ."

"Perhaps," De Medici smiled faintly. His new fears had emptied him of the scene he had planned with the man—a casual and triumphant scene with Norton cringing and miserable. "I've had a rather bad night," he added vaguely.

"Well," the lieutenant shrugged, "it's been no worse a night than I've had."

Norton sighed and, leaning forward, placed his hand on De Medici's knee.

"Young man," he continued, "I feel I owe you an apology."

"Yes," De Medici agreed, "I was coming to that. How is Miss Ballau?"

The lieutenant smiled tiredly.

"Oh, don't rub it in," he answered. "Miss Ballau is quite well, I fancy. Have you seen her?"

"No, I just got here," De Medici said.

"I mean did you see her last night?"

De Medici stared at the detective.

"Of course I saw her last night . . . here. You were here. . . ."

"I mean after our little party here," Norton went on.

"After I left?" De Medici began and paused.

"Yes."

Norton's wearied eyes confused him. After he had left? Then . . .

"Where is Miss Ballau?" he cried.

"Well, as I said before," Norton answered, "I owe you an apology. We let her go almost immediately after you and the doctor left. The case against her has collapsed. That is, so far as her actual guilt is concerned. That's why I called you over last night. I thought you might fill in the missing links."

De Medici's face remained without expression but his thoughts were circling wildly once more. Norton was still talking.

"It was a mistake to arrest her at all. I felt from the beginning that we were acting too hastily. But the burned note sort of decided things for me . . . for a little while. But—there were too many unexplained things . . . too many ends. So

we let her go. It's the only way. She knows something and it's impossible to get it out of her here. We've got a better chance waiting for her to lead us to the man or woman who murdered Bal-lau. She's shielding someone. I could see it last night. . . ."

"Where is she now?" De Medici interrupted tensely.

Lieutenant Norton shrugged his shoulders.

"I think my men will locate her before the day is over," he answered with bitterness. "But she eluded us after we let her go. That idiot Michael-son. . . ."

"You lost track of her?" De Medici murmured.

"Yes," Norton swore, "she went out of here and . . . that's all."

"I see," said De Medici.

He stood up and forgetting to say good-by to the man, walked slowly out of the office. Norton stared after him. In the street De Medici paused.

"He'll send somebody to follow me," he mused. "He thinks I know where she is . . . and know more than I've told. . . . He let her go. . . . Then he must suspect someone else. Me, perhaps."

He smiled wryly. His thought took another turn. He had withheld the thing from his mind. It came now swiftly and in detail. . . .

"It was Florence," he muttered. A chill came

over him. He walked slowly, speculations and conjectures dancing in his brain.

"If he'd only held her till this morning," he mused desperately, "her innocence would have been established. But now . . . good God! a few hours after her release from the cell I am attacked by Floria . . . as Ballau was attacked. Yes, it was she. I remember something. What? What? Hm, it's too inhuman. Florence creeping into my room to murder me! Two weeks ago she kissed me. It's insane . . . a bewildering circle . . . Ballau's body with a dagger in its heart, a dance of lunatic clues and macabre evasions which seem to be ending as insanely as they began. Now we come to another arc in this circle. She tried to murder me last night. Why? . . . Ah!"

He drew the telegram from his pocket. Lytton was a man with a powerful mind, a man not to be fooled. What if he had captured the real Floria? She was someone whom Florence was trying to shield. . . . Again the chill dropped into De Medici's heart.

"Her mother," he went on to himself, "Lytton's captured her mother. And Florence expected something of the sort. Another effort to throw suspicion from the woman. . . . Yes, she came into my room last night. Why? Ah, it grows simple. To repeat the Ballau crime and distract suspicion from the creature in Rollo.

There's a terrible logic to the thing. Florence under a mania worse than her mother's . . . the mania of sacrifice. . . . A habit that undermines. The martyr obsession. She feared Dr. Lytton and, released from jail, she hurried to commit a crime so similar in its details to the one committed by the real Floria that the conclusion would be inevitable; Floria was in New York and not in Maine. . . ."

De Medici walked on, his head lowered, his eyes gleaming with despair.

"We're on the wrong track," he announced suddenly to himself; "farcical sleuths trailing chimeras. We've bungled everything. There's something else . . . someone else. It's I she suspects. Her silence, her strangeness, everything. . . . A ruse to protect me. The burned letter . . . all part of her plan. There is no Floria. . . . She's saving me from a crime she thinks I committed. . . ."

Again his thought stopped and a sigh escaped him. He had been trying to build himself against the despair that lacerated his heart.

"No," he repeated, "no. It was she last night in my room. A false attack. She didn't mean murder. It was made merely as a gesture to establish her mother's innocence. Hm, but I know better than that. The dagger plunged for my heart. . . . Too clear a memory to evade. My

arm saved me. . . . A crazed woman. And what else? Oh, yes, the laugh. I remember. . . . She laughed. After the dagger had struck, she laughed. . . . And it was her voice. I remember now. Florence's voice, wild and crazed, laughing over me . . . after the dagger had struck. . . ."

The knowledge which overcame him sickened his thought. His face had become drawn. Fears ached in his heart.

"Worthy of other days," he whispered. "Yes, a plot out of De Medici annals. But I must find her. Unless I find her I'll go mad myself. . . ."

He looked up and saw ahead of him the Hudson Apartments. He had, without thinking of destination, walked toward the Ballau home.

"She'll be there," he murmured with sudden conviction. And his eyes growing excited, he walked toward the familiar entrance.

CHAPTER XII

THE WOMAN WITH THE CACKLING LAUGH

Treasures for sale—Bidders and buyers and candlesticks—In which an old woman makes an exciting purchase—In which Julien De Medici pursues an aged Alice in Wonderland—The beginning of a story.

DONOVAN, the doorman, greeted him.

“Good morning,” he said. “There’s quite a crowd, sir.”

De Medici nodded. He recalled there was to be an auction of the Ballau treasures. Money was needed to pay the dead man’s debts and provide his daughter with expenses.

“Started yet?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Donovan’s eyes took in the vestibule. He came a step closer and added:

“You know, Mr. De Medici, there’s been a lot of clews around here.”

De Medici assumed an air of polite conspiratorial interest.

“Yes,” went on Donovan, “and I didn’t tell all I knew to none of them, seeing it wasn’t anything that would help. But I’ll tell you, sir. Things weren’t all right in the Ballau apartment for some

time. Many the time I've passed their door and heard screaming. A woman screaming and Mr. Ballau arguing with her. . . ."

The doorman straightened and resumed his doorman manner. A group of visitors to the auction had entered.

"We'll talk more about it later," De Medici murmured and stepped toward the elevator.

Voices came from behind the closed door of the Ballau apartment. De Medici pressed the bell and waited. The door opened slowly. A sound of chattering and laughter struck him.

"Hello," he bowed to the woman who had admitted him. Jane. He looked curiously at her. For a moment he had failed to recognize her.

"In there, sir," she said, indicating the crowded library.

"Have they started yet, Jane?"

"Yes, sir."

"And how have you been? I haven't seen you since the inquest."

She shook her head. Tears lighted her haggard eyes.

"They're selling all his things," she whispered; "all his nice things."

"Has Miss Ballau been here yet?"

She stared at him.

"Miss Ballau!" she repeated. "She . . . she was arrested."

The old woman's shoulders fell and tears rolled over her thin cheeks.

"Miss Ballau was released last night," De Medici said softly. "She's quite all right now. . . ."

"Thank God!" Jane nodded.

He walked toward the crowded room. He would talk to her later. Florence had induced her to perjure herself. He recalled Donovan . . . a woman screaming and Ballau arguing with her. Yes, maybe Jane could help out. . . .

In the library he took his place unobtrusively on the edge of the scene. His preoccupation filmed the excitement for him. . . . The visitor with the dagger. And, worse, her laugh as he lay presumably dying, stabbed to death. . . . Mania—no question of that. And Hugo had didactically pronounced her normal. He was thinking of Florence. His mind played deliberately with his emotions.

"Florence, mad," he stood thinking. "It's interesting to think of someone I know and love being mad. It produces fear—delightful fear. Hm, love is the ornamental curtain behind which all the pathologies disport themselves clownishly."

He studied the scene. A throng of varied hats, chattering faces. The light was dim.

"Half drawn curtains," De Medici mused. "Meyerson stages it well. The drama of mystery

lends a tantalizing value to the objects under his hammer. The talk is low-pitched. Eyes glance furtively around. Yes, this is the sort of thing that appeals to the normal imagination. Melodrama—the melodrama of externals. They look and see a conventional room, conventional walls, drapes and ceiling. Commonplace things in an uncommonplace light . . . the familiar decks in a lurid symbolism. And they thrill at the thought that murder and mystery lurk behind the uninteresting masks of convention.

“Fear,” he continued to himself, “is the most seductive of the emotions. It prostrates itself deliciously before all unknown things. In its grip one rises to mysticism. And these people shiver and revel in the thought that they are part of something more enigmatic than the transparent routine of commerce and society . . . part of a melodrama which tiptoes gaudily in the corners of this dimly lighted room.”

De Medici’s eyes were fixed on the large table at the end of the room, behind which Meyerson and two assistants had taken their places. His thoughts assumed a practical air.

“They would come here,” he began in a new vein. “Curiosity would bring them.”

He was thinking of the strange life Ballau had led, of the curious folk whom he had known in his wanderings as actor, dilettante and collector.

“There should be something to seize on here,” he stood musing. “Not that I have any faith in so-called criminal psychology . . . the criminal returning to the scene of his crime. Poppycock! And yet there is something in the notion. A desire to boast. A desire to test one’s immunity to detection by mingling with people under the noses of the very police looking for one. Also a feeling of insecurity. Yes, a criminal would feel the suspense of insecurity, and in order to make certain that he was as yet not suspected he might seek out the presence of his pursuers. As for the scene of the crime idea itself, a crime which created a sense of satisfaction in its perpetrator might lure him to enjoy its memory more vividly by a return to the scene. If he still felt the original exultation which the murder aroused in him, the sense of freedom and sudden quiet which such an act would undoubtedly bring to his inner self, he would return just as a drug addict is unable to keep away from the cabinet containing his favorite drug.

“But,” continued De Medici, inwardly amused by his seeming knowledge of the subject, “if the criminal was frightened, if his sense of relief was secondary to his feeling of remorse, would he come back then? Not if he were half normal. An abnormal, psychopathic person would be lured by the thing toward which he felt fear. The hypnosis of terror. Hm, an unlikely theory. The bird and

the snake idea and as fallacious as that. Snakes do not hypnotize birds, nor do corpses hypnotize murderers. A man seeking to overcome his fear would return just as an old maid looks under the bed to show herself that there is nothing there to be worried about. . . .

“So where are we? No place. He or she may be here at the auction. And, again, he or she may not. That’s the trouble with psychology. At its best, psychology is an elastic process one uses in vindicating one’s preconceived ideas. . . . I came here with a feeling that something would most likely occur. And here I am trying to bolster up this intuition with involved and spurious logic.”

He looked up, aware of a silence. Meyerson had taken his place behind the long table and was rapping for order.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the man began, “we are about to dispose of the collections which were lately the property of Victor Ballau. These things comprise art treasures, literary treasures, ornaments, hangings, all of exceptional value and unquestionable taste. I wish to announce that I have taken charge of this auction, that my house has put a value upon each of the objects which will be offered to you. It is understood that if the bidding falls under this value the firm of Meyerson & Company will purchase it at the price already

fixed. We will now begin. Mr. Jones will take charge of the selling.”

Meyerson nodded toward a narrow-faced young man standing near him. The young man, Mr. Jones, stepped forward and, clearing his throat portentously, launched into the rigmarole of the auctioneer.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” his voice rang out, an excitement in its tone, “the first object for your consideration this afternoon is a set of Chinese chess men carved two thousand years ago by the skillful fingers of an Oriental craftsman in Hwang Ho.”

Mr. Jones turned toward a second young man, who lifted a large ebony box into view and removed its cover. Selecting one of the chess pieces from it, the orator continued:

“Each and every one of these is an exquisitely carved little statue worthy the hand of a master. The craftsmanship and genius that went into the construction of these charming intellectual toys are part of a lost art. There are only three sets of this description in the world. What am I bid, ladies and gentlemen?”

The bidding began at once.

“Fifty dollars,” said a voice.

“Seventy-five.”

“Eighty-five.”

“One hundred dollars.”

Mr. Jones resumed his excited recommendation. De Medici, half listening, heard the phrases, "marvelous taste," "carved under a microscope," "purest ivory. . . ." He smiled as, after fifteen minutes of jockeying, the set went to Meyerson, who had valued it at \$1,500. A pair of Ming vases came next. Two Shakespeare folios followed. An antique rosewood chair was offered.

De Medici listened and watched with increasing interest. The sale of Ballau's treasures had stirred no covetousness in him. Yet the scene acquired an exciting significance in his thought. As each of the objects passed under the hammer De Medici found himself coming closer to the memory of his dead friend.

"Yes," he said to himself, "it would seem that these things that are being sold were Victor Ballau. At least the Ballau I knew. Curious, how friendship may be like that—an admiration for the things surrounding a man and for the varied images of him which these things reflect. I'm glad Meyerson has been decent about it. Otherwise the thing would have degenerated into a grab bag bargain rush . . . everybody snatching at the remains of poor Ballau."

The place was growing stuffy. De Medici experienced a reaction. The adventure of the night, and the subsequent enigmas which he had pursued, began to take toll. He would wait a few more

minutes and leave. The auction, despite his intuitions, was turning out a cut and dried business.

He turned to look at the crowd from a new angle, and his eyes lighted on a remarkable figure. An old woman with the face of a witch, her head covered by a black bonnet, her chin resting on the knob of a heavy cane that she clasped in her hands, sat within a few feet of him. Her face was a blur of wrinkles, the nose and chin coming almost together over a toothless mouth. Her little black eyes, however, appeared to be blazing with excitement.

“Hm,” De Medici murmured to himself, “a creature of sinister ugliness.”

He paused to study her. She was following each of the objects offered the crowd with a fanatical intensity.

“Cupidity,” he thought, losing track of the auctioneer’s chatter. “She’ll buy nothing. But the joy of possessing animates her. It’s a way people have of clinging to life—by developing hobbies, by achieving grotesque and concentrated enthusiasms for certain objects. Existence is less complicated for a stamp collector than a social philosopher.”

His vague musings were suddenly broken. The witch-like creature had risen from her chair and was brandishing her heavy cane in the air. She stood cackling in a strident voice.

“Forty dollars, Mr. Auctioneer, forty dollars. . . .”

De Medici watched her push her way forward violently, her large body dislodging an amused and indignant line of men and women.

“Forty dollars,” she cried furiously as she moved to the auctioneer’s table, her cane still describing eccentric circles in the air.

De Medici turned to see what had aroused the creature. The narrow-faced Mr. Jones had paused deferentially in his harangue, holding an object in his hand . . . an ornamental bronze candlestick. For a moment the scene remained a meaningless bit of excitement involving the grotesque old woman and the polite auctioneer. Then a warmth animated De Medici. His eyes shone. The thing had happened! The candlestick in the man’s hand was one of the pair. Yes, it or its mate had stood beside the head of Ballau on the night he was found murdered. And there had been a lighted candle beside his own head a few hours ago.

Candlesticks . . . candlesticks! There lay the mainspring of the mystery. Murder was a simple thing. People killed each other. And there was nothing to be deduced from actions as broad and general as murder. It was by the odd detail that a crime might be uncovered . . . the thing that was a signature to the deed.

Confused and elate, De Medici watched the auctioneer address the old woman in a whisper. The candlestick was wrapped up and handed to its new owner. He heard Mr. Jones explaining: "Yes, there's another. A mate to this, but it's not on sale."

So she had asked for the other one, too. The one which formed part of the mysterious evidence in the hands of the police. His meditations ended as the creature pushed past him. She had apparently lost all further interest in the auction. She had bought the mate to the candlestick that had stood at Victor Ballau's head the night he was murdered . . . and was leaving.

"This is what I was expecting," De Medici murmured inwardly, "something like this."

He was following her carefully into the hall and out of the apartment. She paid no attention to him as they entered the elevator together. With her package clutched under her arm, she walked off limpingly down the street, a heavily dressed, bent old woman leaning on a cane, her witch face peering obliviously ahead of her. De Medici, smiling, sauntered in her wake.

"We must forget everything," he mused, "Florence, Rollo, Maine, midnight visitors and everything, and pay attention. Here's a clew. It may be a coincidence. A candlestick fanatic. But the Ballau auction would be out of her way. Park

Avenue is a foreign settlement to her. She came there for a purpose. She showed interest in nothing until the candlestick was offered. Yes, she came to buy one thing—the pair of candlesticks.”

The slow chase turned out of the main thoroughfares. The old woman seemed in no hurry. She zigzagged from one street into another. Despite her age her bent body seemed tireless. For an hour she continued moving, ignoring street cars and vehicles. A labyrinth of decrepit little streets confronted De Medici. Pawn-shops, dirty-looking stores, restaurants and movie theaters. . . . “As I thought,” De Medici mused, “Park Avenue is a foreign settlement to her.”

He paused a short distance from the old woman. She had come to a halt in front of a decrepit house. The blousy street was alive with noisy, dirty-faced children, fat women and foreign-looking men.

The old woman peered about her for a moment and then moved toward the evil-looking shack. De Medici watched her body disappear slowly down a flight of basement steps and hurried forward. As he arrived, she entered the lower part of the house through an ugly-looking door. He could hear her lame step thumping in the distance from the foul-smelling hallway.

It was dark. De Medici hesitated as a door opened. The woman had vanished behind it. He walked carefully down the stretch of dark hall and,

locating the door, knocked. There was no answer. Turning the knob cautiously, he opened the door and entered. A startling scene greeted him. He found himself in a disordered room dimly lighted by a single window that rose to an alley. The place was heaped with clothes and strange pieces of furniture that crowded each other against the wall. Over a half hidden table the old woman stood bent, eagerly unwrapping her package.

"Hello," De Medici remarked. "Sorry to disturb you."

The old woman wheeled around. Her little black eyes blazed at the intruder.

"Get out . . . get out!" she cried stridently, raising the heavy cane menacingly. She advanced toward him in a fury. De Medici retreated.

"I just wanted to talk to you for a moment," he added calmly.

"Get out! Get out of my home," screamed the old woman.

His hand caught the cane as it descended toward his head.

"Come now," he smiled at her, "I'm not here for anything except to ask you a question. I saw you at the Ballau auction and followed you here. I was a friend of Mr. Ballau. I wanted to talk to you."

The creature's attitude changed. She looked at him in silence and lowered herself into one of the

many chairs that crowded the dimly lighted place.

De Medici nodded gratefully.

"I followed you because you bought that candlestick," he continued. "I wanted to ask you why you bought it."

The old woman nodded and repeated his words with an elated cackle.

"Ha, why I bought the candlestick!" She paused and beamed at him. "Nobody else got the candlestick. . . ."

"An eccentric," De Medici murmured. Her ugliness and sinisterness had given way in the moment to a childishness. Aloud he said:

"I'm very much interested in that candlestick . . . and the other one, its mate."

"Yes, the other one!" the woman exclaimed. "They didn't have it. My, my! I couldn't get it. I wanted them both, but they had only one."

She looked at her visitor, and then cocking her head to a side, inquired:

"Well, well . . . so you were a friend of Victor Ballau. Ha, sit down, young man. Sit down."

De Medici obeyed, his mind busy with ways in which he might surprise whatever secrets from the old woman that lay behind the wrinkled witch's mask of her face. She sat rubbing her hands together nervously and regarding him with brightened eyes.

"How did you happen to buy the candlestick?"

De Medici asked again, his voice mild. His eyes, accustoming themselves to the poor light, were taking in some of the features of the room. He had the sense for a moment of having blundered into a theatrical warehouse. Spangled gowns, tawdrily upholstered chairs, sofas, dilapidated theater trunks, ancient "flats" containing parts of drawing-room walls, and various other knick-knacks which he recognized as scenic fittings, littered the place.

"From the way you went after that candlestick," he was saying with a careful smile, "I thought maybe you knew something about it . . . and its mate."

She nodded her head.

"Ha, I wanted them both," she answered, "but there was only one. But I'll get the other one sometime. You wait and see. I'll get it."

"Harmless," thought De Medici swiftly, "and not on her guard. It'll be best to talk directly." He continued aloud:

"Why did you want them?"

"Ha, ha," the old woman cackled in answer. "I wanted them, all right. I know something about them. Ha, they belong to me. This one does, anyway."

"And what do you know about them?" De Medici persisted. His body was quivering with excitement. Here lay a clear and open track. Here was

a creature who knew something about the candlestick signature. But her next words irritated him. Her childishness would be as hard to circumvent as shrewdness might have been.

She leaned forward and spoke in a hysterical whisper:

"They were Victor Ballau's candlesticks," she said.

"I know that," De Medici nodded impatiently. "But why did you want them?"

She laughed.

"Why did I want them? Ha! Look at this."

Her gnarled hand proudly indicated the cluttered room.

"I got most of it all here, young man. Nearly all of it. Years and years it's took to get it all. And when I read in the papers that Victor Ballau's ownings were going to be auctioned off, I knew I'd find something I wanted because Victor Ballau was always fond of the old Goldsmith and I knew he'd have some of the things. And, sure enough, there was the candlestick. But there ought to have been two of them and there was only one. I recognized it at once . . . although it's more than twenty years since I've seen it. But it's genuine."

"Where did you see them last?" De Medici asked, his thought groping with the word "Goldsmith." . . . He was thinking, "the Goldsmith

Theater . . . oh, yes, the program in the handbag. It was the Goldsmith Theater program. . . .”

She interrupted his gropings.

“Ha,” she cried, “they couldn’t fool my old eyes. They belonged to the Bandoux Repertoire Company of the old Goldsmith.” She became excited with memories. “Yes, yes, those were the days. You should have been there, young man, you should have known those days.”

“The Goldsmith Theater in London,” murmured De Medici.

“The finest repertoire company that ever lived!” the old woman exclaimed.

“How do you happen to be interested in the old Goldsmith?” he interrupted with a smile.

“Me! Me! Ask anybody if they remember old Fanny of the Goldsmith,” she cried. “I worked there for twenty-five years. I was dresser and mistress of the wardrobe, I was.”

“I see,” De Medici nodded, “and that’s how you knew Mr. Ballau.”

“Knew him,” she went on, “did I know Victor Ballau! He would tell you, if he was alive, how much I knew him.” She appeared to be challenging mysterious contradiction. De Medici sighed inwardly. The intuitions which had led him to the auction congratulated themselves. He realized a slight disappointment. Childishly, he had expected immediate revelations—complete unrav-

elings of the thing that had clouded his thought. Nevertheless he smiled and settled back. There was something here. This was a woman to whom part of Victor Ballau's life that even he had never been allowed to penetrate was a matter of intimate knowledge.

"A little deranged," he thought quickly as she arose and pattered around, "and the victim of a monomania. Her senility has developed a miserly love for trinkets and dresses of the stage with which she was surrounded in her youth. She's evidently devoted herself to accumulating these souvenirs of her past. Hm, and something else. Florence's mother. Ballau wasn't her father. Norton established that. Then this creature should know about the woman Ballau married—Florence's mother. . . ."

His musings ended. In a flash the theory concerning Florence's mother returned in full to his thought . . . the woman for whom Florence had been intent upon sacrificing herself and whose guilt she had tried to assume. . . . He leaned forward and spoke soothingly to the ancient wardrobe mistress:

"My name is De Medici," he said, "and the reason I was interested in the candlestick you bought is that one of the pair was found at Mr. Ballau's head when he was murdered. I am engaged to marry Florence Ballau and I've been

working with the police trying to find out who it was killed her father. Now, if you can tell me anything that might throw a light on this thing, it would be doing a great service to the memory of Mr. Ballau . . . and the Bandoux Repertoire Company.”

“I know about that,” the old woman answered in a whisper. She seated herself again. “I read about it in the papers. I ain’t seen Victor Ballau since he left London. And he ain’t wanted me to see him, either.”

“Quite right,” De Medici nodded. His manner had become calm and ingratiating. “After all you knew about him, I shouldn’t think he would.”

“Maybe it wasn’t his fault,” the woman went on. “But let bygones be bygones. I hold nothing against him now.”

“Did you know the woman he married in London?” De Medici interrupted.

“Yes, oh, yes. I knew her well enough. Madam Bandoux.” She nodded vigorously. The old eyes gleamed and the bony hands trembled with excitement. But words seemed slow and De Medici prompted her.

“She was Florence Ballau’s mother, wasn’t she?”

“Wait a minute!” the creature cried. “She was Florence Bandoux, whose first husband used to own the company at the Goldsmith. And she

was Miss Florence's mother. Yes, I know all about that. You've come to the right place, young man, to find out all about that. Nobody knows as much as me what happened at the old Goldsmith."

Through De Medici's mind flitted the memory of the leather purse he had picked up in the Ballau library on the night of the murder, with the initials F. B. in the corner.

"Do you know what became of Florence Bandoux?" he asked.

The old woman was staring at him. Her body had grown rigid.

"Yes," she whispered finally, "I know. And I ain't ever whispered a word of it to anybody. I know what became of Madam Bandoux. Victor Ballau killed her. Don't you tell anybody I told you, but that's it. That's what happened. He killed her, I tell you. He was a murderer, was Victor Ballau. He fooled them all but he didn't fool me. But he's dead now and I never said a word of it when he was alive."

De Medici placed his hand soothingly on her arm.

"Come now, Fanny, tell me about it. It all happened long ago and there's nothing to be afraid of, now Mr. Ballau's dead."

"I'll tell you, young man," she answered. "We were to have finished the season, but Ballau took her away. He was stage manager then at the

Goldsmith and there was a lot of talk. Madam Bandoux was a great actress but a bad woman. She broke poor Victor's heart. And after that he took her away and nobody ever heard of her again. Everybody thought she came to America with him. But I know better. She died in England, and he killed her. She broke his heart, I tell you. And that's why he killed her. When she was young she ran away and married Bandoux, the Frenchman. And a year later she came back to London with the baby Florence. Bandoux came back, too, but he refused to have anything more to do with her. And, what's more, he said they weren't married. All the time this went on poor Victor Ballau was in love with her and she threw him over to run off with the Frenchman. But when she came back poor Victor took up with her again. But she hated him. She hated him all the time, and nothing he could do was any use. The girl was Bandoux's daughter, not Victor's."

"But how do you know he killed her?" De Medici persisted softly.

"How do I know I'm sitting here?" the old woman answered. "Because I know. I'll tell you. I used to hear them quarreling. It was awful. And one night after the show I was passing Madam Bandoux's dressing-room and I heard her screaming. And I stopped to listen, and there was poor Victor inside saying: 'Do you detest me like

that? Do you loathe me like that?' And Madam was screaming, 'I do . . . I do.' And then I heard Victor Ballau say in a low voice, 'Then I'll have to kill you.' And that was a few days before she disappeared. They went away together after that. But nobody ever heard of Madam again. He came to America alone a little while after, taking the baby with him. But nobody ever heard about poor Madam Bandoux except there was a rumor he had married her, Victor Ballau had. And I kept my mouth shut because I was sorry for him and he was a fine man before it happened.'"

"And what else do you know?" De Medici murmured.

The old woman laughed bitterly.

"He shouldn't have killed her. He was such a nice man. But that's the way life is. The nice people do all the bad things. And he got his reward, poor Victor did. Somebody killed him."

De Medici arose.

"If I want to talk to you can I find you here, Fanny?" he asked.

"Yes, here. All day," she answered.

He spent a few minutes thanking the old woman and finally closed the door of the littered basement room behind him. In the street he walked swiftly, intent on finding a cab. A few minutes later he was riding through the traffic. His eyes half shut, he was again tracing the circles of the mystery.

“From what she said,” he thought as the cab bounced slowly forward, “one thing becomes certain. Florence Bandoux is still alive. It was her purse I found in the library. Her initials. And the woman Hugo is bringing back from Rollo tonight is Florence Bandoux, alias Floria, the lady of the dagger. So far, so good. But this other thing, then. Hm, an offensive discrepancy. The attack on me. That wasn’t by Floria, then. Yes, I was right before. A sickening idea. But it was Florence trying to imitate her mother. Willing to kill me and thinking she had . . . and laughing. But for whom did she laugh so insanely? Because madness was in her. Her desire to divert suspicion from her mother become a mania. Grief and terror unbalancing her mind. And in an hour of insanity this grewsome plan of imitating Floria and thus exonerating the woman she had hidden in Rollo, Maine. To be understood. Yes, easy to follow.”

An emotion shattered the sentences. He loved her. And she had tried to kill him. It didn’t matter. He still loved her, adored her. The sense of her torment and madness seemed to bring him prostrate before her.

“I must save her,” he mumbled to himself. “I’ll go home and write her a letter. I’ll get it to her somehow. I’ll tell her everything I know. Everything . . . yes, about Floria and about the thing in my room. . . .”

CHAPTER XIII

THE TWO FLORIAS

In which Julien De Medici meets a train and grapples with a skyrocket—The triumphant phantoms again—In which Dr. Lytton relates an incredible story concerning dawn in Rollo, Maine—"Come at once—she is dying."

THE train was pulling in. Its headlight swinging down the track filled De Medici with violent emotion. In a few minutes Dr. Lytton would alight, leading at his side the long sought and mysterious Floria.

With a roar and hiss of steam, the train loomed at his side and came to a stop. The bustle of alighting passengers ensued. Sleepy-eyed travelers entering New York at midnight, loaded down with bags and packages, began to emerge from the cars. De Medici's eyes raced from exit to exit. Impatience had deprived him of thought. He stood shivering in the smoke-filled shed. Figures hurried by. Then someone called his name. Turning excitedly, De Medici found himself face to face with his friend Dr. Lytton. And at Dr. Lytton's side stood Florence Ballau.

De Medici's thought remained in suspension.

He noticed that the doctor was holding her arm, that she was pale and almost tottering, and that her eyes were half closed.

“A cab,” Dr. Lytton ordered tersely. “Hurry! She’s in a bad state.”

Still De Medici stood motionless. The shock that the sight of Florence had given him had vanished almost immediately. There was another confusion now, a familiar and vaporous twisting in his head, as if thoughts were endeavoring to turn themselves inside out.

“Hurry, Julien. A cab.”

Dazedly, De Medici turned and walked out of the station toward the cab stand. He waited until the two arrivals caught up. His eyes stared miserably at the ground. Inside the machine he forced a question from his lips.

“Where did you find her, Hugo?”

Dr. Lytton shook his head. A triumphant gleam was in his eyes.

“All in due time,” he replied. “Wait till we get home.”

De Medici was relieved for the silence. He sat with his head sunk, inwardly conscious of the inanimate Florence beside him. She had spoken no word of greeting or explanation. His thought traced itself sardonically over a single sentence.

“So this is Floria!”

A desire to laugh came to him. The shock which

her unexpected appearance beside Dr. Lytton had given him had been short-lived. At once, on top of his astonishment, had bloomed a new fear. At the sight of her and the triumphant-eyed scientist De Medici became aware in an instant that his carefully pieced-together theory of the thing lay in shreds. Unable to keep his thought calm and invent something plausible to explain the insane shiftings of the past few weeks, the terror from which he had suffered during the early days of the Ballau mystery reinstated itself.

He sat now with his carefully molded smile, the smile that had aggravated the suspicions of Norton.

“The thing comes back,” he mused. “The creature in my bedroom, the creature that tried to murder me and that left a candle burning at my head and a crucifix on my chest, was not Florence. No, this creature was Julien De Medici. A crafty and insatiable maniac engaged in fooling himself. God, what a notion! Yet if there is another self to me, how easy and natural. This becomes almost too ludicrous to be mania. But why not? A heroic effort to establish an alibi in my own eyes. Rather clever, in a way. I see visions. I see the lady of the dagger. And I attack myself somewhat carefully but convincingly. And as a result I stand exonerated. It was not I who killed Ballau but this creature who tried the thing on me.

Clever, yes. But twisted and absurd. But not if I am mad. That is, completely and intricately mad. Not if my sanity is a pose which I cunningly loan myself. But the letter from Rollo. Then I sent that to myself, too. Yet there was a postmark. Who saw the postmark? I or the doctor? I forget this point."

The smile on De Medici's long face weakened. His thin fingers moved dreamily over his cheek. In the silence of the cab his musings resumed:

"Then she knows it was I. And what she has done has been for my sake . . . to protect me. There must be more to this than I have been able to remember. The night I called for her at the theater, the night it happened. . . . There must be innumerable things to remember. But I remember nothing. I can't begin to understand, and I want to laugh. Yes, my reasoning arouses laughter in me. If I laugh it would mean, of course, that I am mad. Or, perhaps it would mean that I am sane. God knows! There is only one thing definite. Florence did not visit my room last night. Yes, and another thing. The phantoms still crawl around in me. My first emotion when I saw her at the train was again the sentence, 'I am guilty.' It sprang to life once more as it had the moment I leaned over the body. . . ."

The cab was stopping. De Medici sighed and opened the door. Furtively his eyes watched the

half animate girl as Dr. Lytton helped her from the cab. She appeared indifferent to the situation. De Medici, overcome with anguish at the sight of her pallor and listlessness, took her hand and pressed its cold fingers.

“Florence,” he whispered, “is there anything I can do?”

Her dark eyes opened full on his face and an incredible intuition passed through him. She was acting! Her collapse, her manner, was entirely a pretense. Dr. Lytton returned from the chauffeur.

“Come, hurry. We’ll have to take care of her first.”

In the apartment the doctor became somewhat officious. He appeared to be treasuring dénouements, his manner toward De Medici growing condescending. De Medici, inwardly confused and victim again of the elaborate fears which had darkened his days since the murder of his friend, stood quietly against the wine-colored curtains and waited.

“Whatever he has found out,” he thought, “is valueless or at least of no value as a finale. For there is still the dagger lady who visited me last night to explain away.”

He smiled cautiously, convinced anew that this creature was no more than a phantom evolved as an alibi by his own cunning madness.

“Yet, I never felt more normal in my life,” he

murmured to himself, "unless my madness or hallucinations are able to create a sense of normality in me. If I was mad last night, when the thing happened, then it is obvious that I am mad at this moment. For I am conscious of no different sense or state of mind. And it becomes obvious that I have been thoroughly mad ever since I can remember, and that what I consider my normality has been no more than a cunning pose with which I deceived myself."

Dr. Lytton turned to him. He had removed the girl's wraps.

"We will have to put her in bed," he remarked. "She's had a hard day."

De Medici nodded. His eyes avoided Florence now. The scientist spoke softly to the girl and, nodding her head listlessly, she arose. Dr. Lytton led her toward the bedroom. Left alone, De Medici stood contemplating the long folds of the curtains. He felt tired, and an inclination toward self-pity brought tears close to his eyes.

"It would be easy to drop the whole thing and announce myself as mad," he murmured, "easy and almost desirable. As it is—well, I'll hear all about it in a few minutes. Florence, though . . . she acts. Her manner is too perfect. . . . The Bandoux woman . . . yes, what about her? . . ."

He grinned vacuously.

"I've given her some powders," Dr. Lytton

announced, reappearing. "I think she'll be asleep soon. And, good Lord, she needs it!"

"Yes," De Medici answered, "she looks all done."

His attitude toward the scientist had become wary and amused. He had intended blurting out to the man the mystery of the night. Instead, he treasured the fact in silence.

"If I announce that," he thought, "he'll at once suspect me. The phantom theory will occur to him. A ruse, an alibi. . . . Yes, he's been suspicious of me from the first."

De Medici shuddered. Another idea had opened in his mind. He recalled his theorizings during the auction, his wrestling with the psychology of a criminal. Would a criminal return to the scene of his crime? Would the sense of insecurity lead him there, or the sense of morbidity? He remembered with a chill how cleverly he had debated the thing with himself, arguing the points pro and con.

"Curious phenomenon," he mused coolly, "it was I returning to the scene of my crime. And yet I seemed to be arguing aloofly. . . ."

Again the impulse to laugh seized him. The absurdity of his self-suspicion almost overcame him. He controlled his features and nodded calmly at his friend.

"Go on," he said. "What has happened?"

Dr. Lytton had seated himself and lighted a cigar.

“Well,” he smiled, “I can tell you the story now. We have to deal, as I surmised from the first, with a most fascinating case of dissociation, commonly called dual personality.”

De Medici smiled. Then it was Florence, and the doctor had proved her guilt. Obtained a confession, his telegram had announced. The man, for all his cleverness, was an ass. He had managed to bungle everything as idiotically as had Norton. But as he stood, aware that he was sneering at his friend, a new twist entered his thought.

As the doctor started talking, the idea had flashed through De Medici’s mind. . . . “Quite right. Florence. It might have been she. And the creature with the dagger last night might have been I. Innocent of Ballau’s murder, constant fear of my possible guilt may have resulted in the creation of the dagger phantom as an alibi—an unnecessary alibi.”

Dr. Lytton, supremely satisfied with himself and oblivious to the changes of expression in his friend’s manner, was proceeding in the professorial manner he assumed when expounding indisputable truths and unalterable facts.

“I want to point out to you first,” he announced, “the fact that the obvious, although frequently open to doubt, is nevertheless not to be

dismissed. It is a common fallacy of people engaged in the solution of mysteries or more scientific problems to flout the obvious and to search for the secret in things hidden from the cursory eye. It was this fact which led us somewhat astray for a while."

"I am in no mood for a Freshman lecture on psychology," De Medici interrupted calmly.

"I'll tell the thing in my own way," Dr. Lytton smiled.

"Very well." De Medici shrugged his shoulders. "I'll listen to what is pertinent and ignore the rest."

"You can listen or not as you please, my dear Julien. But I advise you first to relax. You look as white as a ghost, and have been standing there for almost fifteen minutes talking to yourself like a lunatic. There's nothing to be gained by experimenting with your nerves. I've told you that before."

"You went to Rollo," De Medici murmured.

"Excellent," the doctor laughed. "I went to Rollo, Maine. And I'll pass over the various details that led me to the conclusion that Floria was to be found in Rollo."

"Thanks."

"I arrived there around three in the morning," the doctor continued unperturbed. "An abominable place. One rustic hotel. And it was closed.

While you were sleeping peacefully in your bed, my dear Julien, I was parading the dark, chill streets of Rollo, Maine, in quest of comfort, clews and companionship."

"While I slept comfortably in my bed," smiled De Medici.

"What's wrong?" Dr. Lytton asked abruptly.

"Nothing. Go on. You are in Rollo. The streets are dark and chill. And you search for clews."

"I see. You are prepared to flout my story."

"I'm listening, Hugo."

"Before I go on, Julien, I must impress one thing on you. Prejudice is a poor guide for deduction. If you are in love with poor Florence you will be helping her more by facing the facts squarely. . . ."

"My emotions are in abeyance, Hugo. I listen only as a Dr. Watson."

"Very well. I will first indulge in a modest preamble."

"A short one would be better."

"Facetiousness," smiled Dr. Lytton, "is a good outlet for nerves. I make no claim to any sort of intelligence on my part for what happened during the dawn in Rollo. Accident is very often the determining factor in philosophical as well as scientific discoveries.

"I had come to Rollo to find Floria, and as I

was walking the streets with no place to go or sit down I found her. I saw her at the end of the block hurrying toward me. Her face was pale, her hair was in disorder, and her eyes were wide and staring. It was Florence Ballau. She passed me without any sign of recognition, and I realized at once from the obvious physical symptoms she presented that she was in a pathologic state. I followed her. She walked through the streets without purpose or destination, moving swiftly and blindly.

“After an hour, or what seemed an hour, I caught up with her and took her arm. She looked at me and said nothing. Now there is one principle in pathology which is elemental. In talking to a dual personality it is a waste of energy to address the ‘wrong’ person. Thus, it is futile to waste one’s breath trying to convince a man who fancies himself the king of Siam that he is not the king of Siam. Because when addressing the victim of such an hallucination, one is addressing not the victim, but the hallucination. Do you follow me?”

De Medici nodded. His mind had grown violently active. The scientist’s words died in his ears, as more and more he gave himself desperately to the unraveling of a new and astounding theory that had entered his thought.

“Well,” continued Dr. Lytton, “knowing this,

I took her arm. She looked at me. I said to her, 'Good morning, Floria.' The ruse worked instantly. Her eyes lighted and a look of complete recognition came to them. She stood regarding me excitedly for a moment and then collapsed in my arms. The village drugstore was just opening and I carried her inside. After the druggist and I had revived her I led her to the hotel and got a room. We sat down and began to talk. I had the advantage. I knew exactly the pathologic state with which I was dealing. I said to her: 'It is useless to conceal anything, Miss Ballau. I don't know how you managed to escape from the police. It may be that they liberated you on their own account.'

"This was very possible, considering their tendencies to commit blunders. Then I asked her if she were able to follow what I was saying. I saw at once that she was not a distinct dissociation case, that her dual personalities were not ignorant of each other, as is frequently found in some of the more pronounced cases that have come under my observation. It was obvious also that Floria and Florence Ballau were gradually merging into a single personality with the result that the young woman, instead of suffering from periodic and isolated attacks of what we may call insanity, attacks which after their conclusion left her the

normal Florence Ballau we knew, was now become a single disordered brain.

“The air-tight compartments in which each of her personalities had their separate being had broken. The result was this distracted semi-maniacal young woman who had fled from the police station to Rollo to hide. I explained all this to her and she was able to follow me in part. It was necessary to explain the thing, first, in order to give her a momentary consciousness, that is, a perspective, and, secondly, in order to assure her that craft and concealment were futile.

“Well, when I had finished she took up the story and cleared away several of the details which had bothered me. Her confession was extremely interesting from a scientific point of view.”

“She confessed the murder?” De Medici murmured. “Saying she remembered it?”

“In due time, Julien. Before reaching the murder, and in order to understand it, we must establish the scientific motive. As the morning progressed Florence, or Floria, grew calm and extremely docile. I placed the entire conversation on a scientific basis, a ruse which invariably disarms criminals of her type. For instance, I asked her if she knew when she had experienced the shock which had caused the dissociation or duality of ego. She told me the thing had happened or must have happened when she was quite a child.

This, as you know, is frequently the case. Victor Ballau had once tried to kill her father, a man named Bandoux. Poor Ballau was in love with Bandoux's wife. And Bandoux's wife was her mother. Ballau had conceived a desperate passion for the woman. Failing somehow to kill the man, he concentrated his jealousy on the wife. In the child's mind there came the realization that this Ballau was at the time causing her mother, whom she idolized, trouble and anguish. She told me that she remembers one night seeing her mother lying on the floor of a room and sobbing. Ballau had reviled and struck her in a jealous rage. Florence remembered also that her mother had cried out on the night she died that she would be avenged. The child was perhaps only three or four years old at the time, but the scene was sufficient to produce the shock which later brought the duality on.

“Now consider this. As a child she had always called her mother Floria. Her mother died when she was four. Ballau carried the child off and brought her to America. As she grew older the shock experienced in her childhood began to show results. The hallucination that she was her mother began to grow in her and this hallucination finally became so strong that it was able to overpower her normal self and she became Floria.

Yes, Floria, the avenging mother whose life Ballau had ruined.

“As for the murder,” Dr. Lytton smiled with an air of discussing trifles, “you recall, Julien, that poor Ballau seemed nervous about the engagement. You mentioned things—suspicions—to me. Well, nervous he was. Ballau called her up that night with a very simple message. He wanted to tell her something in relation to the party he was giving. And he was also worried about her. He had noticed symptoms—telltale symptoms of her recurrent mania that day. The sound of his voice over the phone stirred her subconscious mind and brought uppermost the Floria complex. Recall, she said: ‘Yes—yes—immediately. Oh, God!’ She was merely talking as Floria. She left the theater and hurried to the apartment, determined on the vengeance that the Floria who lived in her was continually demanding.

“Jane, the housekeeper, let her in. I’ll return to this in a moment. She faced her stepfather in the library. He looked at her and knew what had happened. This was no longer Florence Ballau, but the maniac who thought herself Floria, the lady of the dagger shrieking for vengeance. Poor Ballau knew this creature. He had struggled with her before. It was the secret that he held from the world. We must picture what followed our-

selves. Miss Ballau doesn't remember. Up to this point I have quoted her confession. From here on we reconstruct the scene of the murder.

"You see how simple it all grows, Julien? Floria, the lady of the dagger, killed Ballau. She remembers dimly, she says, of striking him with a dagger. She remembers nothing after that for several minutes. Her normality gradually returned. But not entirely. She was able to realize the crime that had been committed, but she was not able to return to Florence Ballau. I neglected, by the way, to say that the purse you found was the property of her mother. And the dress as well. Both items which her maniac self treasured as souvenirs. And when she entered the apartment that night her first impulse was to dress as her mother—in these things that had belonged to the woman. Do you follow me so far, Julien?"

De Medici sighed again. The doctor's words had continued to buzz harmlessly in his ears. His narrow eyes were glancing furtively at the horizontal pattern of the wine-colored drapes. The confusion which had come to him an hour before appeared to have lifted. Through his thought drifted the words:

"One chance. One chance it wasn't I. All this convinces me. Yes, everything he says points to me, inasmuch as it completely exonerates her. But there's still one chance. . . ."

The doctor's question wakened him to the man.

"Yes," he answered, "I follow you . . . entirely, Hugo. Go on. There are a few more details."

"A case of stubborn prejudice that surprises me—in you, Julien," the scientist remonstrated quietly. "For the sake of an emotional conviction you choose to ignore utterly the logic of the thing. The confession. The dovetailing of every bit of evidence. It doesn't require much imagination to see Florence Ballau, alias Floria, preparing the camouflaged room after the killing. The cunning instincts of a half-maniac—to divert suspicion from herself. In fact, she remembers finding the beard in an old trunk—in the trunk which contained her mother's effects. A beautifully conceived impulse, her first one, that of glueing the Vandyke to his chin. But ruined by her indecision. For after she had placed it there, the strange look of the man bewildered her and she tore it off and forced it into his fingers. She reasoned, as she did so, that if he held the false beard in his hand it would appear as if he had torn it from someone else's face—and therefore seem as if he had been attacked by a disguised man. But her first impulse was infinitely better. I mention it merely as one of those little things which always rise to prove the superiority of intuition over reason. The beard pasted on his face would have

been a successful mist over the crime. Consistent, impenetrable and so on. But the beard torn from his face was too obvious a clew. It confused Norton and us, but even without Miss Ballau's confession it would have eventually given us the correct lead."

"You sound a bit unconvinced on that point," De Medici murmured in an abstracted voice, "but I'll let it go."

"Yes," growled Dr. Lytton, "thanks. But the final proof comes now. I return to Jane, the housekeeper. In her youth Jane was a close friend of the mother. Jane is a simple-minded woman and her sympathies were entirely with Florence. She, too, remembered the abuse that Victor Ballau heaped on her mother, and in her own simple way understood the mania that operated the thoughts of the daughter. After the murder Jane helped Florence prepare the scene, dispose of the evidence—you remember the clumsy attempt at concealing the dress on the fire escape. Also the incident of Florence directing the attention of the police to the fire escape. You told me this yourself. This little point itself shows that there were two minds that camouflaged the scene—that Florence was unaware Jane had hidden the dress outside the window.

"There," concluded Dr. Lytton, "you have the crime in full as Miss Ballau confessed it, as I un-

raveled it and as I wrote it down, and as she signed it before we got on the train at Rollo this afternoon."

"And the note from Rollo, Maine, signed by the lady of the dagger while Florence was in New York in jail?" inquired De Medici.

"We will find out that she gave it to someone to mail," smiled the doctor. "A part of the crude cunning which characterizes her Floria nature."

"And my visitor last night?" murmured De Medici.

Dr. Lytton looked at him.

"What visitor?" he asked.

"A curious one," smiled De Medici. "A visitor that has stood beside you laughing in silence at your words, dear Hugo."

The scientist stared at his friend. De Medici had risen. His face was flushed and his eyes were gleaming.

"The thing unravels itself in my head," he continued, his voice grown tense. "Yes, dear Hugo, a melodrama. Crude, preposterous, but easily proved. And simple."

"You mean that you doubt her guilt?" Dr. Lytton snapped.

"That I know who killed Ballau," De Medici answered. "Yes, not Florence. And not your good friend Julien. And not the phantoms either. But someone else."

“And you know?”

De Medici nodded. His brows were contracted. When he spoke again it was in a meditative tone.

“The commonplace, Hugo,” he said softly, “how easily one overlooks it. Little questions that a child might ask. For instance, what an awful lot of work it must have been for a single woman to take care of ten rooms alone. One can’t help but feel a curious admiration for the diligence and energy of Jane, the housekeeper. Wait a minute!”

He pointed his finger commandingly at the scientist.

“Sit still. I want to show you a little drama I have written while you talked.”

De Medici moved swiftly to the telephone.

“Park View 0146,” he spoke into the mouth-piece.

Dr. Lytton glared at him.

“Mad,” whispered the scientist. De Medici smiled.

“Hello!” he exclaimed suddenly into the telephone. “Who is this?”

A pause and he continued: “Jane, this is Mr. De Medici calling. Miss Ballau is very ill at my apartment. We have the doctor here. She is dying. She told me to telephone you at once. She says she must see you, that you must come over at once.”

De Medici listened. No sound came from the other end of the wire. And then a scream drifted out of the receiver.

“Do you understand?” he shouted. “Come over at once.”

He waited a few moments for a sound. But the receiver remained silent against his ear.

“She’s gone,” he murmured. He hung up and turned to the doctor.

“I am at the present moment unable to decide, Hugo, which of you is entitled to the credit of being the world’s greatest blundering idiot, you or Lieutenant Norton. But possibly it may turn out to be I. So we’ll wait.”

He seated himself calmly and, his face grown imperturbable, lighted a cigarette and stared at the indignant scientist.

CHAPTER XIV

ACT II

The burning-eyed visitor—An old favorite—Amateur theatricals—"Light the candles!"—In which Julien De Medici reveals himself as an effective playwright.

THEY had been sitting for fifteen minutes in silence. De Medici finally spoke. He had grown nervous and catlike, his eyes furtively caressing the curtains of the room, his ears strained for sounds.

"She should be here now," he said. "It's only fifteen minutes' walk."

Dr. Lytton grunted and said nothing. A savage light was in his eyes.

"Are you sure Florence will sleep?" De Medici pursued.

The doctor disdained answering.

"Perhaps it's been unfair of me," De Medici smiled tiredly, "but I've been holding something from you. A woman entered my bedroom last night just about the time you captured your Floria in Rollo—and tried to kill me. She caught me in the arm with a dagger. I fainted, and when I awoke I found a crucifix on my chest and a candle burning at my head."

The scientist's eyes widened. He nodded as if weighing this evidence and then remarked curtly:

"I can only say, Julien, that you've gone mad. You've been the victim of hallucinations. The Floria image has been in your mind so long and so vividly that it finally materialized into an optical illusion."

"There was a wound—and blood," muttered De Medici.

"A self-inflicted attack," Dr. Lytton answered curtly. "How long are you going to wait for this visitor of yours?"

De Medici had given instructions to his man, Harding, to admit any caller without hesitation. Listening to the doctor, he stiffened. He had heard an outer door open.

"Sh-h," he murmured.

There was a long pause. Dr. Lytton followed the fixed gaze of his friend, and both men sat watching the door that opened into the curtained room. Slowly De Medici rose. The door was opening.

A tall, burning-eyed creature in a preposterous dress that dropped a silken train behind her stood on the threshold. Dr. Lytton had moved excitedly.

"Quiet!" De Medici whispered, seizing his arm. "Here is Floria."

The woman was advancing slowly into the room.

It was Jane, the housekeeper, in a masquerade. Her eyes were alive with mania. The hollow cheeks were crazily rouged. The awkward body and the skinny hands had become curiously graceful. Behind the crazed make-believe of the creature loomed a startling personality. Pride, terror and strength mingled in the flashing, charcoaled eyes. She continued to move gracefully toward the two men. In the center of the room she paused. Looking about her, she spoke in a vibrant, throaty voice that shot a thrill through her two intent listeners.

"I conjure you," she cried, "save him. I have come to you with my heart in my hand."

Her eyes slowly focused upon De Medici. He was standing in front of her, regarding her with a puzzled attentiveness.

"You will save him, Baron. You must. You alone can do that. See how I have humbled myself and come to you."

De Medici's face lighted. He became suddenly alive.

"Quick, doctor. In the kitchen," he whispered. "Bring some plates and a bottle. Put them on the table here."

Dr. Lytton, his previous indignation vanished, slipped from the room. A vague and exciting understanding had come to him. De Medici cleared the table hastily and lighted the candle-



sticks. As he did, his fingers snapped the electric switch and the room dropped into a yellow shadowed darkness. Dr. Lytton returned with his arms loaded.

“Set the table as if for a meal,” murmured De Medici, his eyes holding the stare of the woman, “and bring a knife. A long knife.”

The woman, oblivious to these maneuvers, had begun to talk once more.

“Name your price, then, Baron,” she intoned.

“Hurry,” De Medici whispered to the scientist, “and leave the rest to me. I’ll take the part. I know it well.”

He turned to the woman, his figure become polite, leering, his hand extended.

“Ah, Lady Floria,” he smiled at her, “venal my enemies call me. But remember, I do not sell myself for money. If I must betray my honor”—he paused to laugh—“I insist upon choosing my payment.”

He advanced toward the woman, his manner becoming unctuous and caressing.

“You have scorned and braved me, Lady Floria,” he spoke, “yet your beauty has kept me enslaved. I’ve watched you clinging to your lover like an amorous tigress and I vowed that you would be mine some day.”

He paused and waited. The woman’s eyes had taken fire. Her head flung itself back in a superb

gesture. Her voice came throatily and distinctly.

“No. I would rather kill myself.”

For an instant De Medici beamed with delight. Then again the unctuous, leering manner returned.

“You forget,” he cried, “you forget I hold your Mario’s life in pawn for yours, Tosca.”

She nodded regally.

“And do you think, Baron Scarpia, that I would contract so hideous a payment with you?”

De Medici, in search of his lines for a moment, hesitated and then cried out:

“How you detest me!”

The Tosca facing him laughed.

“I do,” she answered, “with my soul and body I loathe you.”

“Ah, ’tis thus I love you most,” he spoke.

Dr. Lytton, eyeing the incredible make-believe for a moment, had become busy. The drift of the strange scene had penetrated his thought. His hands had cleared the table and arranged the plates and bottles brought from the kitchen. Carefully he laid the knife on the edge nearest the woman. De Medici, seizing the swing of the lines he had evidently once known, fired the antiquated Sardou speech at the woman, remembering and improvising as he went.

“Spolletta, pay attention.” He was addressing imaginary actors. “I have changed my mind.

The lovely Floria and I have made a bargain. Let Cavaradossi be shot. Here is the order."

Turning to the table he scribbled with a pencil on a piece of paper.

"Here, Floria," he said, "the passport. I have fulfilled my promise."

"Not entirely," came the voice behind him. "I must have a safe conduct enabling me, too, to quit the country. For I go with him."

"After tonight?" De Medici murmured, "you will leave me?"

The voice behind him answered:

"Yes, forever."

Dr. Lytton was watching narrowly. He saw the metamorphosed housekeeper stealthily approaching the apparently unconscious De Medici. With infinite caution her fingers reached for the knife on the table edge. She held it behind her as De Medici raised a wineglass in his hand.

"Ah, my lovely one, my beautiful Tosca, at last thou art mine."

As he spoke the woman appeared to become transfigured. The terror of her eyes gave way to an exultant light. She stood poised for a moment, gazing at the man straightening with the wineglass in his hand. Then with a cry she raised the knife and plunged it toward De Medici.

He had been waiting, his body tensed for the

moment. His hand caught the descending arm and frustrated the attack. But immediately he sank to the floor, crying hoarsely:

“Help me, help me, I am dying.”

Dr. Lytton, who had followed the grewsome pantomime, stood motionless against the curtains. The woman approached the figure spread on the floor and remained looking down into the face of the man she had slain. Then, without removing her eyes from him, she went through the motions of washing her fingers in one of the water glasses. She stopped, and her gaze centered on the two lighted candles. A shudder passed through her.

De Medici, warily alert, watched her lift the two candlesticks from the table and lean over him. For a moment the face of the madwoman breathed against him as the candlesticks were placed one at each side of his head. She had kneeled. Tearing the crucifix that hung from her neck, she laid it upon his chest and then arose.

Actress and murderess had become merged in her eyes. She glanced wildly about the darkened and shadow-dancing room and then, with a last look at the figure on the floor, moved toward the door. She walked like one in a dreadful dream, her body moving as if impelled by a force.

De Medici, still motionless, waited till she had retreated several steps. Raising himself, he whispered quickly:

“Don’t let her get away, Hugo.”

But the woman had paused before Dr. Lytton could move. Her figure grew larger in the shadows. Her gaze had torn itself from the one on the floor. She was staring straight ahead of her. Standing in the doorway blocking her path was Florence Ballau.

The girl’s hair was down and a drowsy look was over her eyes. She stood regarding the woman in the trailing gown and then, raising her arms, stumbled forward with the cry:

“Mother . . . mother. . . . Oh, my God!”

CHAPTER XV

HEARTS AND FLOWERS

In which Florence takes up the drama—A taxicab, as in the beginning—In which what is left of the reader's suspense and curiosity is carefully removed.

THE cab bowled slowly along through the circuitous park roads.

"I'll tell him to take his time," De Medici whispered. "The air will do you good."

He looked at the girl beside him. Tenderness lighted his face.

"There's really nothing to worry about any more, Florence. Your mother will have excellent care where she is. Dr. Lytton wrote me that he's taken personal charge of the case and that she's as happy as anyone could expect."

Florence nodded. Her hand took his.

"You've been wonderful," she said. "And more than anything else, I admire your reticence. It's a week—and you haven't asked me any questions yet."

"I've been waiting," he said. "And rejoicing in my own way. There's no hurry for the epilogue. And anyway . . . I prefer this."

He raised her hand and kissed it.

"I'd like to go somewhere and talk," she said at length. "The cab's a bit inconvenient. And I'm tired."

De Medici yielded the point with a minor protest.

"I have an obsession in favor of cabs," he smiled. "I've always done most of my thinking in cabs, and most of my business has been transacted in them. I fancy it's because rooms always used to depress and frighten me."

He gave directions to the chauffeur.

"We'll go to my place," he resumed. "And on the way I'll tell you about my end of the mystery."

As the cab turned back De Medici began his story, confessing for the first time aloud the strange suspicions that had seized him as he bent over the body of his friend Ballau.

"I was convinced at the moment," he explained, "that, in a fit of mental aberration during which I took on some of the characteristics of my ancestors, I killed poor Victor. And the more I thought of that, the more guilty I seemed to feel."

He continued relating the fears that had haunted him, the hallucinations that had accused him during the ensuing weeks. Florence listened quietly, her large eyes regarding him with emotion.

"I love you so," she murmured, "and I knew there was something like this. And I tried to utilize it to save her. It was never clear in my mind just what I was doing . . . or just how it would be spared. But it's better this way, I'm pulse, determined that whatever happened, she would be spared. But it's better this way, I'm sure."

They left the cab and entered De Medici's apartment.

"I'll like living here," she smiled as they sat down in the room of the curtains. "Providing, of course, the ghost of Francesca is forever laid."

"Forever," he answered.

She studied him in silence.

"Yes"—at length—"there is a change. Something seems absent from your face. A nervousness. As if . . ."

"As if," he supplied, "the phantoms of De Medici had said good-bye."

"As if you loved me in a simpler way," she corrected. "But I'll tell you what's left now. If you wish to hear."

"Some tea?" he asked.

He gave instructions to his man. Ten minutes later they were sitting happily over their emptied cups.

"Well," Florence began, "it goes back to long ago. I remember none of it. But the story is

familiar. Poor father—I still must call him father—told it to me at least a dozen times. It was in London before I was born. There was a man named Bandoux, a Frenchman. He and Victor Ballau were rivals for my mother's love. Does it sound stilted?"

She smiled sadly.

"A rather old-fashioned melodrama," she continued. "Bandoux was a dashing, unscrupulous sort. And she eloped with him. They were gone about a year and they came back to London with me. Bandoux had refused to marry her, even after I came. In fact, he mistreated, abused and reviled her every hour of the day. And poor Victor still loved her. Mother was young and temperamental and proud, of course. But finally Victor's love reached her heart. They were married and lived together happily for a year."

"Old Fanny was a little mixed in her dates," De Medici smiled as she paused, "but otherwise the story is the same—to that point."

He told her briefly of his adventure with the wardrobe mistress and the candlestick.

"I don't remember her," Florence went on. "Well, father, that is, Victor Ballau, was in charge of the Goldsmith Theater at that time and mother was playing the leads in the repertoire bills they put on. Things were going nicely, and

apparently poor mother had forgotten the hell she'd been through with Bandoux.

“Then one day father had to leave London on business, and in his absence the leading man fell ill. I forget his name. The manager in charge dashed around frantically in search of some experienced repertoire man to take his place, and found—Bandoux. He'd had a hard time of it and was willing to join the company for anything he could get. Mother objected violently at first. But it was either Bandoux or shutting down for the week, there being no actor available at the price they could pay for a mid-season employment. And so mother finally agreed. Bandoux played in the cast that night. Oh, he was a scoundrel! Everything that has happened, all the tragedy that haunted poor Victor Ballau's life, came from him and his rottenness. The play that night was Sardou's ‘Tosca.’

“Father has told me all these details. I was about three years old at the time. But I seem to remember the creature, a flamboyant type of cheap actor. With a grand manner and a nasty temper. Terribly vain of his looks. An unscrupulous rogue who devoted himself to boasting and to women.

“Anyway, Bandoux took the part of Baron Scarpia. Mother played Floria La Tosca. It had always been one of her favorite rôles. The play

went through the first act with nothing unusual happening. Mother was nervous and excited but managed to restrain herself. Her loathing of this man Bandoux was almost too much for her. And in the second act the thing happened. The grief he had caused her, the hatred his perfidy had left in her heart, flamed out. And when the murder scene arrived, poor mother went out of her head. She raised the dagger to kill Baron Scarpia as she had so often done in other performances. But this time she screamed and hurled herself at Bandoux. He was almost taken by surprise but managed to defend himself and escaped with a slight wound. Mother fainted. There was pandemonium and the curtain was rung down.

“Father came back the next morning and found her still raving. She had been taken to a hospital and was completely out of her mind. She was Floria La Tosca, screaming the idiotic lines of the play and going through the pantomime of the stage murder. For a month she lay completely insane. Her mildest moments were spent in weeping. The rest of the time she lay crying out that she wanted to kill Scarpia, who had betrayed her. Poor father was beside himself with grief. Nothing, of course, could be done with Bandoux. They got rid of him and hushed up the scandal.

The theater was closed and father devoted himself to her. He was a wonderful man, the finest man that ever lived."

She paused in her story, her eyes glistening with tears.

"An impression I always had," whispered De Medici, "a man smiling courteously at grief."

"He did his best," Florence continued. "And gradually the active mania left her. She became what we grew to regard as normal. But she was no longer Florence Ballau. When she got over her violence she had forgotten who she was, she'd forgotten even that she was father's wife. All memory of the past had been wiped out. She left the bed in the hospital one day, quiet once more and unaware of her name, unaware even that she was my mother.

"Father took us both away to a place in the north of England and we lived there for some time. He did everything that could be done to restore her. But it was futile. Apparently she had recovered from her mania. But she was unable to return to herself. She developed during the year in England into a docile, simple-minded woman—the woman you knew as Jane. Father's friends insisted that he put her into an insane asylum. But he refused indignantly. He tried for a time to convince her she was his wife. This fact, however, struck her as preposterous. She

refused to believe it or to have anything to do with father. And he was afraid of talking too much to her about it, afraid of bringing on her insanity again—I mean the active part of it. The result was that he finally hit on the plan of convincing her that she was his housekeeper. This was successful. She seemed willing to accept the part as his housekeeper, and he brought us both to America, giving her another name. And our strange life with Jane started.

“Nobody ever suspected. During the twenty years we lived in New York father was constantly devoted to her. She was in his mind his wife, and despite everything she remained so to the end. He never ceased to suffer because of the position she insisted upon occupying, and he frequently made love to her, trying to persuade her to marry him instead of her remaining his housekeeper. But it was odd about poor mother. She would grow puzzled when he became tender, and then her excitement would begin. He was frightened of bringing on the violence—we called them spells—and he would drop the subject. She would go around for several days murmuring to herself and looking reproachfully at father, whom she had grown to regard as a friend and protector. And if he pressed the matter she would break out with the words: ‘I can’t marry you. Don’t you under-

stand?’ And she would stand and look at him with terror in her eyes.

“As I grew up I became aware of all this and of what was going on. Father made no secret of it. She was my mother. Somehow his quixotic devotion inspired a similar affection in me. She was more than a mother—an unfortunate to be protected and watched over. Through all the years of his success and his rise to fame he remained absolutely faithful to this self-imposed trust of his. There was never another woman in his life than the memory of the beautiful actress that was buried in the simple-minded housekeeper.”

She paused and looked sadly at De Medici.

“So much for the past,” she sighed. “Perhaps you can’t understand how a man could be faithful and as kind as poor father.”

“I can,” De Medici answered. “It is sometimes easier to love a memory than a woman . . . and easier to be faithful to one.”

“Well,” Florence continued, “what I’ve told you is only part of it. There were other things that happened. I’ll have to speak of them too because . . . well, because they form the story. I can hardly talk of them even now. Oh, it was terrible! There were times when Floria returned, the same Floria who had screamed for months in the London hospital. I remember the first time I

saw her. It was about twelve years ago. I came home from school and found mother, that is Jane, dressed in a ball gown and talking to father in a voice I had never heard before. She was playing the part of La Tosca. When I arrived father was in tears. We both managed somehow to quiet her and after an hour she fell asleep. When she woke up she was Jane again. And there was no memory in her mind of the scene she'd been through. She worked around for days, looking dully at us and only half alive. But after this Floria returned a number of times and each time more and more violently. We never knew when one of the spells would come to her and we spent all our time watching her, trying to anticipate her and soothe her. But despite all our efforts we could do nothing. Floria would come and father would at once begin to act. It was the only way to humor her. Several times I sat by crying my eyes out and watching him play Baron Scarpia for her.

“We tried everything—remedies, travel, and even several specialists. But the only thing we found able to bring her out of her spells, to end quickly the delusion which would sweep her, was to let her have her own way for a while. Father discovered that if he indulged her for a few minutes and played the part of the Baron, if he let her dress herself as Tosca, the Floria obsession would collapse of itself. And particularly if I

were present and watching. Otherwise the delusion would last for hours—even days. And all this kept on through years. Oh, it was awful! But he would never consider for a moment sending her away. She was his wife to the last. I'll tell you about the night . . . about the night he was killed," she concluded for a space with a sigh.

De Medici sat waiting, his hand on hers and his eyes staring miserably at her saddened face.

"On the night he was killed," she resumed, "the same thing happened that had happened frequently before. Floria returned. Father, worried and frightened by the fact that my engagement party was to take place in a few hours, telephoned me. He told me briefly over the phone that she was in one of her spells. I understood. There was a chance, if he humored her and if I were present, that we might rid her of the mania in a short while. I rushed out of the theater beside myself. To have this thing happen on this night seemed to me almost too much to bear. I was beside myself with fear and grief. You know, when one has guarded a secret so carefully all one's life, one becomes almost like the secret itself. I was not ashamed of having it known that Jane was my mother. But under poor father's influence, I had all my life worked with him to keep the secret of her insanity hidden from our world. And it was as if something beautiful would be

soiled for him more than for me if it were discovered.

“I got home in a few minutes. I had a key and let myself in. Father had set the little scene as he frequently had done before. He had even put on the black beard that he wore when he played Scarpia for her. He had found that these details served to convince mother of the reality of the scene and to shorten the awful thing. I . . . I opened the door. He was sitting in a chair with his back to me as I entered. I saw mother raise the dagger and strike him, screaming at the same time. I stood still. I thought for the moment it was another one of the awful make-believes I’d witnessed so often. And I waited for father to stand up. He did. He stood up slowly and turned and saw me and nodded with a smile. The dagger was in his heart and he stood smiling at me. The act was over for him, the terrible scene that he had so often played. It was over forever this time. And as he fell he snatched at the thing on his chin and tore it off.

“I still failed to realize what had happened. He had smiled so kindly, I could hardly believe it was anything but a minor accident. But gradually it came to me. I stood horrified and watched mother approach the body on the floor and place the candle at his head and the crucifix on his body. Then she turned and saw me. I thought of one

thing only. That I must save her. I knew he would wish it that way. I remembered how he had looked when he stood before me with the dagger killing him.

“She walked to me and collapsed in my arms. I dragged her to the bedroom and removed the costume. She lay in a heavy sleep for a few minutes. I washed the rouge from my face. My mind, as you can imagine, was not entirely clear. I didn’t know what to do with things. I was obsessed only by the desire to protect her, to save her. And I must have thrust the ball gown out of the window on the fire escape. But I didn’t remember doing it when you came. She lay sleeping and I knew she would sleep for at least ten minutes. I went into the library and then I must have lost my head. I had an idea fixed in my mind of misleading the police with false evidence. All I could think of was to make it look as if a terrible fight had taken place. I pulled a lot of books down, cut a few pictures, and turned over some chairs. I remember blowing out the candle and seeing the beard in father’s hand. I was going to remove it but thought it would be better to leave it there because it would increase the mystery and baffle the police. I thought, too, that the police would figure out he’d been attacked by a man and had torn the false beard from his assailant’s face. I

didn't think of the gum mucilage that might show on his own chin.

"You see now, Julien, why I couldn't tell you anything, why I had to keep still and lie and muddle things up. It was for his sake. I kept feeling how he would feel if anything happened to her—if exposure overtook her. I was desperate and the thought that it was you who seemed intent upon unmasking the thing that we had kept so hidden for so long drove me wild."

"I understand," De Medici nodded.

"After I'd fixed up the library," Florence continued, "mother awoke. I told her that she'd fainted and she said yes, she knew she was subject to dizzy spells. She got dressed and went out to the kitchen to go on with her work and I went into the library and screamed. She came running to me and I told her father had been murdered. She remembered nothing, of course, of what had happened. I impressed upon her that I had just come in and found her fainting, but that she should not tell that to the police because it would look bad for her; that she should just tell them I had come in and screamed. You recall the first story she told. And the time Lieutenant Norton asked her whether she had seen anybody else in the apartment and she said yes, she had seen a man with a black beard, I was standing just outside the door. For a moment I thought it was all

over and that the lieutenant had hypnotized poor mother or something and was going to learn the secret from her. But she evidently recovered herself and the Floria that almost spoke in the library that time remained hidden.

“After the inquest I began to see what was worrying you, poor Julien. I couldn’t understand at first, but from the way you spoke and acted I saw that you didn’t believe it was I who had done it and that somehow you accused yourself. Oh, it was terrible! I didn’t know what you might do, and yet I figured blindly that if I kept still, your self-suspensions would lead you off the track. Then I took mother to Rollo. We had been there once before during a summer. There’s a sanitarium on the outskirts of the village. They knew her there and the thing she was suffering from. And I entrusted her to their keeping and hurried back to New York. I remembered that during several of her seizures she had written letters to father and signed them ‘Floria.’ They were letters threatening to kill him and addressing him sometimes by name and sometimes as Baron Scarpia. Some of them had the picture of a dagger underneath the name Floria. I meant to destroy them and I recalled that it was one thing I had forgotten to do. So I came back and they caught me.

“I had tried right along to make out I was con-

vinced father had committed suicide, and I was hoping the police would believe it. And from the way they acted at the inquest I felt almost desperately certain that they did. I knew you had learned about the telephone call, but I was positive you would say nothing. Oh, you were so good, Julien! But when they arrested me and began their questioning I saw that they hadn't been fooled. I didn't know what course to take, so I decided to say nothing. I didn't care what happened to me. I think I must have gone a little mad myself. And that night they brought you and that terrible doctor to the station I was completely insane. Crazy ideas kept coming into my head. I couldn't figure out how much you knew, and when Dr. Lytton started hypnotizing me I pretended to be in a hypnotic sleep. I was going to confess to being a double personality. I saw at once that was what you and he suspected. But somehow I couldn't. I played with the idea until I became frantic and then fainted. That wasn't acting—the faint,” she smiled; “that was real. But it came in handy.

“And then this awful farce started. Lieutenant Norton decided to release me and did. And I made for the train at once. I had a feeling that things were wrong with her. I must have taken the same train as Dr. Lytton did. It was quite dark when I got off at Rollo and we didn't see each other. I

made directly for the sanitarium. They admitted me and the doctor was glad I had come. He told me that mother had left two days ago and he didn't know what had become of her. She had eluded the attendants and vanished.

"I was beside myself and didn't know what to do. It seemed that all I'd been through was now for nothing. Poor mother was alone, crazed and wandering. God knew where. And I started walking distractedly in the street not knowing what to do first or where to go, when Dr. Lytton stopped me. When I saw him I felt that it was all over, that he knew everything. But when he began to talk to me I noticed at once it was I he suspected. He thought I was the insane one, the double ego and all that. And I listened to what he said. It was easy to take him in."

Here she smiled and De Medici found it suddenly difficult to suppress a laugh. The vision of the didactic scientist and his arbitrary conclusions, his subsequent discomfiture and good sportsmanship in admitting his innumerable errors, lightened the mood between them.

"That night she came here," smiled De Medici, "and I knew, when I saw you beside Dr. Lytton on his return from Rollo, that he'd blundered. That is, I suspected it. There was another suspicion, but we'll not discuss that any more."

"I know." Florence looked tenderly at him.

“Dr. Lytton told me. Anyway, after he’d talked to me in the village hotel I improvised a story that fitted in with his theories. My chief idea was to get him out of Rollo. I was all to pieces. All I could think of was that I had to keep him from finding out about mother at the sanitarium. And when he wanted me to confess, I confessed. It seemed to cheer him up a great deal.”

“Yes,” said De Medici, “he’s a terrible man to argue with. But the truth dawned on me—about her—as we were coming up here from the train. It struck me as if it had been something I had known from the first. Merely that there had been only one other person in your home at the time he was killed and that this person had been Jane. And when I thought this, it all straightened out. I knew your mother had been an actress. I knew you were protecting your mother. And I knew she had killed poor Victor. And knowing all this, it cleared up suddenly when I thought of Jane. There was only one thing. The murder ritual . . . out of a play. I surmised that in the next few minutes while Dr. Lytton was holding forth on your guilt. I couldn’t place the play until I saw her come in the room. And then La Tosca showed itself in my head. I had read and witnessed the thing a score of times and was familiar with most of the scenes.”

Florence rose and moved to a window. De

Medici, beside her, placed his arm about her shoulders.

“There is only one mystery left,” he murmured.

She turned shining eyes to him.

“You,” he said, “and this thing in my heart that makes life incomplete without you.”



THE END

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